The Man with the Hoe

ADAM BLAKE

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LELE AND HER FATHER

The Man with the Hoe.

A Picture of American Farm Life As It Is To-day.

By ADAM BLAKE.

"Noble deeds are held in honor,
But the wide world needs
Hearts of patience to unravel
This,—the worth of common deeds."

—E. C. STEDMAN.

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THE ROBERT CLARKE COMPANY.
1904.

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CINCINNATI, U. S. A.

TO THE

TOILING FARMERS OF AMERICA,

AND THEIR

BUSY WIVES AND SONS AND DAUGHTERS,

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

BY THE AUTHOR.

2134187

INTRODUCTION.

In reprinting this story of farm life, a few preliminary remarks become necessary.

First, as to the title: "The Man with the Hoe" was written and had appeared in *The Ohio Farmer* as a serial before Edwin Markham's poem, by the same title, flamed meteor-like above the literary horizon. There is natural hesitation in offering to the public a book under a title which is linked with another's world-wide fame, and but for a fact which shall be alluded to later, the author would gladly exchange it for one less liable to invite "invidious comparisons." The damage to the poet will, of course, be slight. The chief danger to the writer of the present volume will be that purchasers, when ordering, will forget to specify the author, and upon receiving a copy of Edwin Markham's poem, will find that they have their money's worth, and fail to have it exchanged for the story — on the principle that "it is never safe to give up certainties for uncertainties," — resulting in a decrease of sales for the undersigned.

So, in ordering "The Man with the Hoe," if you wish to get the story, be sure to add: "By *Adam Blake.*"

Second, as to the story: Eight years ago I thought

I had shown you "The Man with the Hoe" full grown. I was mistaken. He was then little more than a child. He has grown since. I think you will find him so much improved that you will not much care if you lose sight of him as he was. In short, you are not receiving a mere reprint of the story you read a while ago. Years have been spent in its revision. The work has been the chief pleasure and recreation of a very busy and often very tired person, who had little time to write, and has, in fact, written very little; one who has seen the crops fail, and the grass wither, and the ponds go dry, and the young fruit-trees go down under the relentless sweep of summer tempests; who has become acquainted, agriculturally, with every bug that bites, and every worm that crawls, and every winged and four-footed pest that makes the discouraged tiller of the soil exclaim, "What next?"

A settled conviction has come to this individual that the farmer ought to have a book of his very own, and that the title of that book could only be "The Man with the Hoe." The serial under this title had appealed to farmers. Many of them had asked for it in book form. The author felt that they ought to be gratified. So here, after long delay, is the book.

Much has been added to the original story; much omitted. Here, more than in the serial, a determined effort has been made to mirror the lives of those who wield the hoe — the peculiar temptations and trials of men who are the nation's hope to-day.

And above all, because of love for the old farm,

and a wish to see its owner prosper, the author has tried to make clear, in this "plain tale" from the Pennsylvania hills, that successful farming is as fine an art as painting or architecture, and should be as carefully studied. The theory that "Any fool can farm" is exploded. Only shrewd men who farm on strictly business principles have a right to marry noble, self-sacrificing women, and rear children, in the country. The misery of an unsuccessful farmer's family is as real and their deprivations as great as can be found anywhere. Nowhere else, except among the city's most wretched poor, does the wife toil more unremittingly, and the children enjoy fewer opportunities for developing all that is best in their natures, than upon such farms as that of Omar Fairfax. And nowhere else is their less sympathy between parent and child, more discord, and a smaller degree of the peace and contentment which should be found so "near to Nature's heart."

It is true, Omar Fairfax is an exceptional rather than a common type of his class. Most of our American farmers are hard-working men, who go to the other extreme and attempt too much. The result is the same. The farm yields her treasures far too grudgingly, and demands sacrifices disproportionately great. Life is on a ledge. Its narrowness appals. Ambitious young men, with Millet's soulless peasant before them as a type of what men may become through ceaseless, unprofitable drudgery, become alarmed, and divert their energies into other channels. Those who remain

on the farm are too often men deficient in education, who feel that they are therefore only fitted for work requiring more muscle than brain. Too late they realize that muscle alone will fail to solve the complicated problems of farm life.

Silas Collins is apparently a successful farmer, and yet he is only partially successful. His broad acres, keen eye to business, comfortable home and substantial bank account still leave something to be desired in his make-up as a successful farmer. He is not a good man, and therefore not a good neighbor, and consequently not a good citizen, and finally, has not the kind of success you would like to have your son attain.

An honest, straight-forward, Christian *business man* is what the author of this book would like to see on every farm in this broad land. One who can at the same time provide for his own and observe the Golden Rule; one that the best of us would be glad to join fences with and sorry to see die; a man that believes in the broadest kind of education, and proves it by the kind of sons and daughters that go out, to lives of usefulness, from his home — young people with faculties not dwarfed, but developed, and who have learned what is best worth striving for in life.

On a little farm near Hudson, Ohio, there lives just such a farmer. Of him it need not be said, as has been said of so many who have preached better than they have practiced: "What you *are* thunders so loudly in my ears that I can not hear what you *say*." He has lived the life that he has for so many years

been advocating. It is a well-rounded life, a successful life in every sense of the word. He owes his success, mainly, to the all-around education which his wise father gave him, and which, in turn, he has bestowed upon his children. This man is W. I. Chamberlain, associate editor of *The Ohio Farmer,* and originator of the "Farmers' Institute," which has done so much to raise the standard of farming in many States of the Union.

The writer knows him best, and shall always remember him most gratefully, as the editor whose kindly suggestions made "The Man with the Hoe" a possibility as a serial, and who, twice afterward, without a fee, examined and criticised revised copies of the MS. If the story in its present form ever meets with the smallest meed of success, it will be because his suggestions were heeded. If, on the other hand, the book, after all, proves unworthy to bear its title, friends of Mr. C. may find solace in the following (which is not new):

Said A: "What a poor sort of a man Z is, with all his religion."

"Yes," said B; "but think what he would have been without it!"

ADAM BLAKE.

AUGUST, 1903.

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THE MAN WITH THE HOE

CHAPTER I.

Anticipation and Realization.

It was the evening before Commencement day at Oxford Female Seminary. Lelia Fairfax sat alone in her room, gazing dreamily over the emerald-green, shadow-flecked campus. Dear was the scene — never dearer than now, when, after four years of study, she was to leave it and begin life in earnest. But, despite broken ties of friendship, the young eyes looked eagerly into the future, and saw there hitherto unexplored vistas of happiness. The past year had been clouded by a great sorrow: an aunt who had cared for the motherless girl since babyhood had died, and thus the only home she had ever known was broken up, though arrangements had been made for her to take up her residence in the family of her guardian as soon as she left school. For eighteen years she had not seen her father; he had written to her once or twice a year, but had never asked her to re-visit the old homestead until now. A letter inviting her to spend a month with him lay in her lap. She had answered it with a

joyous acceptance, and was now trying to picture life in the dear old Pennsylvania farm house.

An interruption to her day-dreams occurred ere long. Sophie Howard, her room-mate, came in, and, lightly kissing her upturned, thoughtful face, exclaimed:

"A penny for your thoughts, chum. They seem unusually *deep*."

"I was thinking," said Lelia, "of what life holds for me beyond our Commencement day — 'when the lights are out, the guests are fled.'"

"A great deal of happiness, I am sure," interrupted Sophie, gaily. "Your guardian and his wife are rich and childless, have a beautiful home, are most delightful people, and as fond of you as if you were their own daughter. I only wish I stood in your shoes."

"Sophie, I have just written to my guardian that I have decided to visit my old home in Pennsylvania before I return to St. Louis. I know he will approve of it, for my aunt, knowing how anxious I have always been to see papa, relented just before she died, and advised Mr. Carpenter to permit me to re-visit my Pennsylvania home, if I wished, before returning to St. Louis after my graduation."

"Your aunt was rather odd, I believe. But I never could see how she could completely separate you from your own father."

"Did I never tell you the story? Auntie never liked to talk of papa, and reticence on the subject became habitual with me.

"You see it happened in this way: Auntie and mamma had made a foolish compact never to marry, in which their elder brother joined. But mamma broke her promise and ran away to marry papa, who was never afterward liked by either auntie or uncle. Mamma was their idol, and they forgave her, of course. Uncle went to St. Louis to practice law shortly afterward, and mamma finally persuaded auntie to make her home with her. But in three years poor mamma died, and auntie, nearly heart-broken, resolved to devote her life to the care of my baby brother and myself."

"But that didn't last?" Sophie suggested, half smiling.

"No. Papa, never very popular with his sister-in-law, put the last feather in the cap of his offenses by marrying again in about a year. Auntie could not, of course, endure to live in a house where another woman occupied her idolized sister's place, and she, after a quarrel with papa, determined at once to go to her brother in St. Louis. She could not, however, bear to give up both Eddie and me, so she prevailed upon papa to give me to her, promising to rear and educate me as her own, and at her death leave me her property. She chose me rather than Eddie because I resembled mamma more. Papa was to write to me once or twice a year, but must never see me while she lived. He, having married a widow with two small children, thought it wise to consent to this arrangement, and consequently I have never seen him since."

"Your aunt died last summer?"

"Yes, just before I returned to school. My uncle had died the previous year. So for the last few months I have not had a relative on earth whose features or tones I could recall. It makes me heart-sick to hear the other girls talking of their parents and brothers and sisters, while I" — the clear voice faltered, and a tear fell on Sophie's sleeve.

"Would your step-mother make you welcome, do you think?" asked Sophie, in tones of sympathy.

"She died two years ago, and papa has expressed a determination, this time, never to marry again."

"Strange — your father is not your guardian."

"My aunt, having inherited her brother's small estate, left all to me in such a way that she thought papa could never acquire any control over it, appointing uncle's law partner, Mr. Carpenter, my guardian. But I do not think papa cares, for he wrote me recently the kindest of invitations to re-visit my old home."

"Needless to ask if you wish to go."

"Sophie, I am *anxious* to go to Pennsylvania. The desire to know and be with my father and my darling baby brother has become almost unendurable. Will you believe it? Auntie absolutely forbade me ever to write to Eddie. She knew he could never be anything to her, and thought he might in some way influence me against her. Besides, he looks like the Fairfaxes, papa says, and that fact alone was sufficient to prejudice poor auntie against him."

"Well, Lele, you occupy a strange position. I

rather envy you the acquisition you expect. How many brothers and sisters?"

"'Seven in all' are they, and I feel as though I could not wait another day to meet them. From what papa says, I think the Fairfax homestead must be really enchanting. It is, he says, one of the most beautiful country homes in Pennsylvania. The scenery is beautiful; the society refined and cultured. He referred to the free, joyous country life in such a way as to make me wild to get away from the smoky, city atmosphere into the real, broad-minded, deep-hearted country. Face to face with Nature, people are so artlessly happy, Sophie; they know so little of the cruel, selfish world that they have scarcely anything to disturb the even tenor of their way their whole lives long; the seasons form for them one continuous 'Nature's serial story.'"

Sophie raised her eyebrows a trifle and looked thoughtful.

"Perfectly secure in their living," Lelia went on, confidently, "they have few worries and no crushing calamities such as hang constantly over the heads of city people. And, best of all, a whole community know and visit each other. There is such a secure and pleasant intimacy possible as could never exist in any city neighborhood. Think of life minus the city discord, jangling, petty social and political feuds and jealousies,— without its temptations to dissipation. There you may confidently look for broad Christian charity;

for simple, consistent, child-like faith in God and man."

"I have always thought that country people *ought* to be happy," said Sophie, with a shade of skepticism in her voice.

"*Ought?* My dear, they are. They can't help it. They have the great peace, the subtle power of Nature, perpetually about them. Their lives of quiet, contented toil fit them for right living. The pure air, the singing birds, and the majestic tranquillity of the eternal hills are sufficient in themselves to produce a negative happiness."

Lele had never lived in the country since she had arrived at years of discretion.

* * * * * *

Two elderly women — a fat German-American and a little brown, wrinkled beldam, with an old-fashioned traveling-basket in her lap, a glib tongue in her head, and a shrewd twinkle in her keen black eyes — sat in the waiting-room at Harrod's station, gossiping so intently that neither of them observed a young lady who entered some minutes after the 4:30 train passed up.

It was Lelia Fairfax, who had been building air-castles all the way from Oxford, based on the grand ovation she was to receive from her father's household at the station assembled. She knew that they lived at no great distance, and half fancied the entire family and a few of their neighbors would turn out *en masse* to welcome her home. She had been told by certain Keystone girls that that was the custom where *they* lived. Lele inferred that it was a state practice. But,

lo! not a soul had come forth to greet her! What could be the reason?

The light of pleased expectancy had all died out of her countenance; it would indeed have been difficult to recognize in the drooping, disappointed face, the same that had beamed with such captivating smiles when she stepped from the train a few moments ago.

The loafers whom every passenger train attracts, even in the country, quickly dispersed; the very ticket agent and telegraph operator vanished. It was such a still, hot afternoon that one could have heard the blue-bottles buzzing in the grimy windows but for the two old gossips, who were evidently awaiting the down train. Every syllable was plainly audible to the girl in the corner, whose attention was riveted by almost the first word she heard:

"Want to know ef I know anything of Fairfaxes, eh?" the little wrinkled woman was saying. "Yes, I know considerable. Sammy's wife used t' live there 'fore she's married, and thro' her I gethered a right smart chance o' news. They're run down turrible uv late year, I warrant ye. Ome's father, ole Mose Fairfax, was a fine, portly old feller — six foot an' a rail-cut in his stockin's ef he was an inch — an' proud ez Pompey. The' wa'n't nobody could lay *his* farmin' in the shade — raised a heap o' fine cattle an' sheep an' wheat; an' ez fer fruit, I've never seed the beat on't. It's amazin' what wheat harvests ole Mose uster hev, too.

"I kin mind when they used t' harvest with sickles.

When cuttin' time come, men would flock in by the hundreds, each with his sickle in han' ready t' hire. 'Peared like the hull county wanted t' be in at the harvestin', an' no wonder, for the'd be a hull raft o' women folks bilin' hams out in camp kittles, roastin' pigs, pottin' lamb, an' stewin' chicken, an' makin' custards an' pound cakes t' kill an' cripple.

"The tables fer the men was sot under the trees in the front yard, an' of all the pourin' of coffee an' helpin' of plates, ye never see the beat! They'd eat till they couldn't hold no more, toppin' off on cherry bounce, an' mebbe gittin' kinder loud in their chaff to'des the last, fer they held that 'all jokes wuz free in harvest.' Then they'd take a rest stretched on the grass, smokin' like chimbleys, or mebbe hev a set-to at 'bear-haulin'' 'fore they went back to the field. It wuz a purty sight, *I'll* tell ye, to see their sickles a-flashin' in the yaller wheat. An' th' sheaves they *did* bind in them days! None o' yer self-binder bundles, with th' heads an' tails both stickin' th' same way, like enough. At ever' round they'd up an' take a swig o' whisky, then at it agin *lickety-split!* Oh, Mose knowed how to git money out o' th' farm; but when he died an' th' children scattered off, Ome, bein' th' youngest, got most of th' land, but 'twas a mistake lettin' him hev it, fer Ome ain't no great shakes at nothin', an' farmin's less in his line than 'most anything else. He's allus runnin' fer some little office or other, an' 'pears to think his farm 'll run itself if he 'tends to public duties.

"I used to be there considerable six seven year

ago. Tude wuz a baby settin' on th' floor last time I wuz there. They've ben runnin' behind ever sence. Si Collins holds a mortgage of $5,000 on their place, an' if 'twasn't that Syd keeps th' interest paid up, th' hull kit an' tucket uv 'um 'ud be boosted cl'ar off th' premises; an' goodness only knows what 'd become of 'em, they's sich a raft on 'em."

If good Mrs. Cahill had been looking at poor, incredulous Lele, she would have been astonished into silence by the expression of the girl's amazed, sorrow-stricken face.

"They're in a bad row fer stumps, *sure*," said Mrs. Cahill's auditor.

"I guess," responded Mrs. Cahill, "they would get on agreeabler among theirselves ef th' boys — especially Ed — wuz pleasanter. Sal could stan' Clem an' Charlie, roughish ez they air; but Ed! he's th' surliest dog, she vows, she ever had to set at th' table with. Allus ready to git miffed at somethin' an' bust out a-cussin'. And they say th' way he plays cards an' drinks whisky is a caution. Him an' Ome never could 'gee,' and I wouldn't be surprised to hear of him leavin' fer parts unknown any day. I *actilly* wouldn't put it much a-past him to take one o' th' horses with him. He'll never get nothin' else, goodness knows. Ed seems to hev a nateral haterd fer farm life, but is fer-ever tinkerin' with wheels. Sal says he'd some kind of a buzz-saw with a treddle onto it fixed up in his room when she lived there, an' of all th' rattlin' an' bangin' an' thumpin' that ever she heerd in all her born days,

he kep' up th' worst! Right in the busiest season he'd be took down with th' inventin' fever, an' be in amongst his ole wheels, poundin' and whirrin' away to beat sixty. Sal says th' noise he made wuz like t' split yer haed; an' then like enough whatever he wuz workin' at wouldn't go jest right, an' he'd fling it on the floor an' bust it all to smash. Then down stairs he'd come, swearin' an' kickin' at ever'thing in his way, an' fling hisself out o' th' house sulky ez all possessed."

"What a trial he must be!"

"Yes, he's a trial, an' Jen hes no patience with him, ez his stepmother had while she lived. Ed wuz middlin' well behaved until she died. He's past redemption now."

CHAPTER II.

The Weary Way Home.

The 5 o'clock train and its attendant bustle and confusion had rolled into the realms of silence. The woman who knew the history of the Fairfax family so well was gone, and was now, no doubt, "noratin'" the annals of some other family to her attentive listener as the train bore them on. Passengers had been met by their friends; no one was left neglected and solitary but poor Lele. Again the blue-bottles struck up their dismal concert in the window. The sun-baked platform was empty. The clock ticked, messages went over the wires. Nothing occurred to break the monotony until the ticket agent glanced in through the open door before going to supper.

"Had any one been there to inquire for Lelia Fairfax?" he was asked.

No one had been.

"Could a conveyance be procured?"

"There is no conveyance," he replied. "Where do you go?"

"To the Fairfax farm," settling her lips into firmer curves. "I can walk. Please direct me." She could not trust her voice to utter a long sentence.

"You go two miles up the crick," he replied, point-

ing to a road that crept across the cinder-blackened track and lost itself among the shadowy northern hills; "then turn *square* to the right an' follow a cross-road half a mile. A big ash tree in a fence corner on the right marks the boundary between the Fairfax an' Collins farms. Not far beyond that you'll see a big brick house with a lot of trees around it. That's the Fairfax place."

Lele thanked him and hurried away, having previously requested him to take charge of her trunks until called for.

The railroad lay in a valley, and west of the station rose a high hill crowned with chestnut trees. Above this hill, like a great golden ball, in a sky all amber and unclouded, hung the descending sun. The shadows were growing long. Soon it would be sunset in the valley, and before her lay three miles or so of unexplored territory! Huge cottonwood trees screened the dimpling water of the creek, and made the road look dim and eerie. As the day waned, their bare, white trunks looked more and more ghostly; the way seemed unfrequented, and at this hour was undeniably lonely.

Lele walked fast at first, in a tumult of emotion. Her ears yet tingled, her heart burned with the memory of that hateful, surely untrue, gossip; she had never heard such things intimated before. The possibility of their being true overwhelmed her with grief and amazement. No sooner was she alone on the quiet road than she burst into a passion of tears.

Some miserable moments passed. Then the storm

blew over. Lele, never morbid, quickly regained her tranquillity, and proceeded in a more hopeful frame of mind.

"What is the use to make myself utterly miserable over imaginary troubles?" she thought. "Gossip is nearly always untrue, and I dare say when I reach home I shall find that my telegram was missent. In an hour I may be entirely relieved of all these apprehensions which I now feel. The scenery is as delightful as I expected. What right have I to doubt the truth of the rest of papa's letter?"

The road wound among hills beautiful with the rich verdure of June. Their steeply sloping pasture fields supported a roving population of sheep and cattle, though here and there was a little "bench" newly set with tobacco. As she advanced, broad, cultivated fields appeared. Almost every turn brought into view some farm house, with the usual accompaniment of orchard, garden and outbuildings. Wheat fields golden with ripeness spread now over the less steeply sloping hillsides. A peace-inspiring scene, enlivened by the crowing of barnyard fowls, the distant tinkling of sheep-bells, or the melodious notes of a supper-horn.

She met no one except some farmers riding homeward on their fat plow horses, which looked almost as content as their check-shirted masters.

"Country people *ought* to be happy," she mused.

"Can you tell me how far it is to Mr. Omar Fairfax's?" she presently asked of a small boy who was "fishin' for pollywogs" by the roadside.

The young fisherman eyed her for a moment as if mentally debating whether to answer her civilly or bespatter her fine hat with mud. Something in her appearance luckily inclined him to leniency, and he condescended to reply in an absurd piping treble:

"I don't take no stock in the Fairfaxes. They won't pay my pa what they owe him, an' I *natrally* despise cheats."

"Indeed!" Lele moved off a few steps.

"But never mind," the fisherman added. "I c'n just as well direct you as not, since I'm having no luck with my fish," and he gave her some very explicit directions. "If I were you, I wouldn't visit those people," he added; *"they won't pay their debts."*

"Perhaps they can't," said Lele, feeling that lump rise in her throat again.

"Pa'll find a way to make 'em 'fore the new flies," replied the urchin. *"We're goin' to take their place."* He had a most astonishing way of talking in italics, throwing in an occasional exclamation point by a perfectly inimitable manipulation of the eyebrows.

"Indeed," said Lele, moving off a few more steps.

"I hope you ain't goin' to visit Jennie Fairfax," the small boy continued; *"she's the hatefullest girl alive!"*

"I am, though," said Lele.

"Well, I'm real glad to see the old thing spited some way," replied the sprite, in his ludicrous crescendo. *"She hates visitors!"*

Lele went on, rapt in uncomfortable meditation.

The ash tree by the division fence was at length

passed. Lele, pausing beneath it to rest, observed that a drove of hogs in the Collins premises had made a breach in the fence, and several were now in the adjoining field rooting up potatoes.

It was now sunset, and the last red beams lighted up the division fence with remarkable distinctness. Lele involuntarily counted the panels from the road to the broken place in the fence, and hurried on, for the roof that had sheltered her in babyhood was now in sight, and she was impelled forward by a frantic desire to know the worst at once.

At last, aching with fatigue and faint with hunger, she reached the big red gate that formed the western entrance to a broad drive, fringed with locust trees, which led past the Fairfax homestead and thence to the barn and stables.

The sunlight had by this time quite vanished from the landscape, but under the glamour of the soft summer twilight the place struck Lele as being singularly beautiful. The wide, sloping lawn was deeply, vividly green, and out of its soft turf rose clumps of graceful shrubbery, finely tapering, delicate evergreens, whose branches swept the ground in the way Nature intended. A true landscape gardener had set the trees and guarded them from distorting pruning. Magnificent elms and maples were grouped about the gables, casting upon the wide, pillared veranda a sylvan depth of shadow even at noon. English ivy clambered over the chimneys, grapevines clustered thick about the rear porch and over the picturesque well-house; while the

veranda pillars were wreathed with honeysuckle, fragrant with the perfume of a thousand creamy blossoms.

Lele experienced a keen pang as she realized that this was home — *her* home she had hoped to call it — and that it was soon to pass from the hands of the Fairfaxes, who had bought it from the red men of the forest in the days of William Penn, and had retained it ever since in unbroken descent from father to son.

Lele had never before realized how dependent she was — what nice provisions had been made to prevent her father from ever getting control of a penny of Miss Roxy's money.

A gate far down the lane closed with a sharp clang, and a young man came toward her with a bridle thrown over his arm. He was a splendidly proportioned fellow, tall and broad shouldered; he walked easily, with long, graceful strides, and carried his head with unconscious grace. There was an elastic strength in his step, an indicated power in the dark gray eyes under their straight, well-defined brows. Evidently he did not see her, for he was walking fast, with his dark, unsmiling, rather severe face uplifted, while his eyes scanned the evening sky, in search perhaps of rain clouds along the horizon. Your born farmer is ever on the lookout for rain indications, whether it be rain or dry weather that is needed.

He was close upon her before he saw her holding the red-barred gate back against the light of the evening sky. He started.

She was curiously regarding him — filled with an

inexpressible longing that this might be the brother whom she dimly recalled as a darling fair-haired baby.

"Oh, Eddie!" she cried. "Don't you recognize your sister?" barely resisting the temptation to throw herself into his arms and sob out her full heart on his shoulder.

"Syd, you mean," corrected the other, reddening with embarrassment, but taking the outstretched hands in both of his. "How in the world did you ever get here? I was just going to meet you."

"I — walked," rather faintly.

"Walked! From the station?" The color rose hot into his face.

"It doesn't matter," said Lele, gently.

"But you should have waited."

"I concluded you had failed to receive my telegram. Are papa and all well?"

"Quite well, thank you." Syd looked pale now, as though smitten with shame. He glanced twice at her as he closed the gate, each time with added distress and regret. "How tired you look! You haven't been home for years and years. What a welcome!"

"Oh, don't, *don't* mention it," cried Lele, turning toward him with a look of real good will. "I'll never think of it again."

"*I* shall, for I ought to have been there to meet you. We are harvesting, but have no right to plead 'too busy' at a time like this. I regret it more than I can say."

"You needn't, for by walking I happened to see

a hole in the fence by your potato patch. You call it a *patch,* don't you?"

"Yes," said Syd, smiling. "If quite large, you might refer to it as a field."

"This was quite large, and several hogs were in it, rooting up the potatoes."

Syd uttered an exclamation under his breath that sounded like "Confound it!" and his face clouded. Lele observed for the first time how very tired he looked.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't have driven them out for you," she said. "But I don't think I would know how. And I'm rather afraid of animals."

"Your timidity would vanish if you had driven stock as much as I have," Syd replied.

"You say *stock,* do you?" mused Lele. "I've never been in the country enough to pick up the farm vernacular. But I think I could soon learn."

"You could learn the meaning of the word *stock* almost any morning before breakfast," said the young farmer, somewhat bitterly. "Half a dozen neighbors are liable at an early hour to send in word that our stock have been making inroads on their premises."

"Is that the way farming goes?" Lele asked. "I should think it would be unpleasant."

Syd turned his head aside to conceal a smile at this *naïve* remark.

"A good many things about farming are unpleasant," he said, and a sigh followed the smile.

"It doesn't always rain when you want dry weather, does it?" Lele asked.

"Not quite. But a misfit bargain in weather is the usual rule. Only you've got to take it at first hand, cash down."

"I hope Syd isn't a weather grumbler," thought Lele. "I've heard they are *dreadful*."

They ascended the veranda steps in silence. How lonely and romantic the old house looked in the violet twilight — for dusk falls fast under the shadow of large trees. Through the boughs the evening star was shining. A feeling of desolation and friendlessness, of being very far away from home among cold strangers, struck through Lele. It was doubtless because the house was so still and dark. Not a light beamed from any window, and in the empty rooms a few mosquitoes droned. Fireflies glimmered in the shrubbery; near the steps a glow worm had lit his little lamp. One of the neighbor's dogs barked monotonously, ceaselessly.

Syd, going forward into the long, shadowy hall, struck a light, invited Lele into the parlor, and excused himself to look for the rest of the family, who were all obviously out of the house.

Not a sound indicated the presence of another human being. Lele, dreadfully fatigued, sank into an arm-chair near the window, and could only keep herself awake by fancying that she heard a ghost coming down stairs. This place, so solitary, and pervaded by a silence so unearthly, must surely be haunted.

CHAPTER III.

Lele's Welcome Home.

Out in the cowpen, at the end of the garden, Syd found his sisters, Jennie and Cora, milking the cows, while Tude, the baby and pet of the family, a curly-haired maiden of six or eight, kept agitating, by means of an elder branch, the buffalo gnats that swarmed on the flanks of the much-enduring cud-chewers. Syd's voice startled them.

"Girls, what do you think! Lele has come by herself — walked all the way out alone. Isn't it awful?"

"What is so awful about it? Haven't I done the same myself many a time without horrifying anybody?"

It was Jennie who spoke. She was milking fast, with both hands, into a well-scoured tin pail, and did not pause or turn around at the news. Jen was a slender girl, dressed in faded calico, with a blue gingham sunbonnet pulled down over her eyes. The curtain of the bonnet was frayed almost to strings, and her sleeves were patched. Dogged enough she looked sitting there on her three-legged stool.

"Oh, Syd, you ought to have hurried," said Cora, abandoning herself to astonishment and dismay. "Won't father be mad!"

"I had no idea it was so late," Syd replied, in a worried tone. "We must make it up by treating her particularly nice, now she's here. *Do* hurry up, girls. I've got to run over to the potato patch and put Collinses' hogs out."

"In again, after you fixed the fence all morning!" cried Cora.

"I believe Collins lets 'em in his own self," added Tude.

Jennie never turned her head or spoke, except to admonish Cora to go on with her work.

"Do stop, Jinsey, and go speak to her," pleaded Syd.

"I — *can't!*" in smothered tones from the depth of the pathetic-looking old sunbonnet.

"Don't act so, Jen. You'll like her when you know her. She's a perfect lady, nice as she can be."

"Why shouldn't she be a lady? She's had advantages enough," and fierce tears rolled over her round cheeks as she thought of her own lack of advantages.

"Advantages don't always make ladies of women. And in any case, her father invited her here, as I guess you know, and we've got to entertain her."

"I'm tired of entertaining people that he invites here. He never considers in the least whether we want them. And I'm sure none of us want his fine lady daughter, with her money and style and education. It's the feather too much, *I* say!"

"What's the use to go on so, now she's here?" Syd spoke, despondently. "You are growing to be a perfect misanthrope."

"I don't care!" cried Jennie, in a voice of contained fury. "I don't care for anything or anybody!"

"Don't ever let me hear you speak again like that, Jean Fairfax," Syd spoke, in a changed tone, and his eyes flashed. It was a tone that made even rebellious Jennie quail and tremble down under her drooping sunbonnet. Tude looked scared, and redoubled her exertions as far as possible, and Cora, hitherto idle, returned to her work.

But it was long before Syd got the family assembled to welcome the coming guest. After the really indispensable evening work was attended to and all were at liberty to meet their guest, another difficulty arose. The girls *would* dress up and the boys would *not*. Syd contrived finally to get the boys to look half-way respectable, and the girls not to look too fine. But all were agreed on one point: they would not make any "spread" over their guest.

Little Tude was the only exception. Fond of company and anxious to please, she readily consented to bear Lele company while the rest were "fixing up," and in a few minutes Syd reappeared at the parlor door with the flower of the family at his heels.

"I've brought Tude to talk to you," he said. "The other girls are busy, but will be in shortly, and father hasn't got home yet. Caught on a jury, as usual, I suppose. I'll tell Ed you've come. Here, Susanna, tell your new sister how many kittens and pigs and chickens you have."

Lele and Tude were soon engaged in an animated

conversation upon the cats, chickens, pigs and calves of the establishment. A great beetle came whirring in through the open window and went sailing around the room, evidently bent on knocking its brains out against the wall. Lele dodged it once or twice, and finally, when it fell to the floor, involuntarily put her foot on it, and crushed it lifeless.

"Oh, poor beetle!" said the tender-hearted Lele. "I've spoiled your whole life, haven't I?"

"Pooh!" laughed Tude. "It's nothing but a bumpin' bug. We kill 'em lots o' times. You ought to see Jen roll out o' bed in the middle of the night an' smash 'em with a broom."

"It's a pity to kill harmless things when they are so happy," sighed Lele. "That beetle was having a real picnic all by himself."

"Was he? I never thought of that," said the child, soberly. "But it's no use to mention it to Jinks. She says killin' 'em relieves her mind. An' I guess relievin' a person's mind is of more use than savin' a bumpin' bug, isn't it?"

At length the door opened and Syd came in, followed by his sisters, whom he introduced as Jean and Cora. Their reception chilled her to the heart. They advanced scarcely a step into the room, did not seem to see her outstretched hand, and sat down in silence near the door. Syd for an instant glowed with anger, but seeing that Jennie was in one of her very worst moods, and that Cora seemed resolved to imitate her, he sat down near Lele and resolutely maintained half

the conversation. It was of no use to expect the girls to talk; they wouldn't, and Syd's face burned with shame for them.

Lele observed them with wonder bordering on incredulity. They were nice looking young girls, Cora about fifteen, Jean, or Jennie, as she was usually called, three or four years older. Cora was fair and chubby. She had blue eyes, her face was round, and her long, light brown braids of hair reached nearly to her knees. Lele thought of Godiva, and longed to see that glorious mane shaken out in all its rippling luster over the child's shoulders. Nothing about her indicated temper; indeed, she would rather have talked to Lele than not, but loyalty to her injured and long-suffering sister kept her silent. Jean was ambitious, but her ambitions had all been thwarted; and jealousy of her step-sister's advantages had filled her with such an intense dislike for that young lady that she considered it a real concession to sit in her presence. As for pretending to like Lele Fairfax, that was out of the question. Jean's best and worst trait was her uncompromising sincerity. It is a commendable trait in most persons, but the truth is, it made a disagreeable girl of Jean McKnight.

She had a very striking face — one that would have been handsome with a winning expression to soften it,— and a pair of large, wonderful eyes, of an intense blackness, under their fringed lashes. Lele noticed what a fine, well-poised head she had, and how alive her face was with quick intelligence; how she seemed, in spite of effort to the contrary, to listen hungrily to

what Lele was saying about her school and the West. When places and persons of note were mentioned, or famous books and pictures referred to, Jennie almost forgot the rôle she was playing in her desire to join in the conversation; but each time she checked herself and remained stolidly silent.

Lele's father had been called away on business, and would not return that night; but in despite of the gossip to which she had unwillingly listened, she had faint hopes of a kindly greeting from Ed. As for Cora and Jean, their presence weighed upon her like an incubus. Much as she had longed for them to appear, she would now have felt their absence a relief.

At length, during a pause, in which Jennie had looked as unapproachable as an iceberg, and Cora had gazed at the lamp, as though unconscious of the presence of a guest, the door opened abruptly, and a short, heavy-set, stolid youth of eighteen or so walked up to Lele with the dogged air of one who wishes to get through an unpleasant duty as soon as possible.

Lele rose, trembling and faint with contending emotions. This was her "darling baby brother," for whom she had longed all these years. She held out both hands in an appealing way, and tears sprang to her eyes. Syd alone noticed how agitated she was.

"I wouldn't have knowed you only fer the photo you sent pap," Ed said, shaking hands awkwardly and hastily backing off. "Sorry *he* ain't at home," he added, as though he felt something additional was required and he didn't know what.

Lele could scarce frame a reply. The thought of meeting her own brother so coldly hurt her worse than even the meeting with Cora and Jean. It was with the utmost difficulty that she repressed a sob. And worse than all, she felt that she was regarded with a kind of wondering contempt by all present except Syd, who looked downcast and chagrined.

Before she could feel sure enough of her voice to make conversation safe again the younger boys came in. Little Clem said "How-de-do" bashfully and crept into a corner back of Jennie; but Charlie, who had the brightest face of any of them, shook hands with real friendliness.

"I hope you're not tired," he said, in a voice very like Syd's.

This bit of tardy, though unexpected, kindness so wrought upon poor Lele that she was sure for a moment that she would disgrace herself in the eyes of this critical family and sob outright. She dared not give him a smile, for she knew the tears would drown it. And Charlie thought her a very proud girl. Worse still, the bored look which she was obliged to assume as a mask for her real feelings struck fire from Jennie's flinty heart and consumed therein the last fragment of her hospitality.

"She looks as if she detested the last one of us," she thought. "So much the better. We shan't be bothered with her a great while. I wish I could have met her at the door and told her she wasn't wanted. She'll not get much pampering here, I'll let her know."

Another dreadful pause ensued. Syd racked his brains in vain for something to say, while more beetles came in and tried to stir the oppressive silence. Lele grew paler. She was aching with fatigue and her eyelids were heavy. Sometimes she felt that it was all a horrid dream. It was impossible to believe that what was transpiring was real. That black-eyed girl in the corner seemed to be transfixing her like Medusa, and Lele had some indefinable fears of turning to stone.

Lele's only consolation was the old king's unfailing motto: "And this, too, shall pass." Dull evenings, like dull sermons, can but end if one will wait long enough, as do all things mundane. And in time this one came to an end.

Jennie, bringing a lamp, offered, with some show of alacrity, to conduct her weary and disheartened guest to her room. Lele hesitated an instant, glad as she was to seek her pillow. Disappointed as she was, she was yet too young and healthy to forget that she had an appetite, which for hours had been clamoring for food. But Jennie had evidently forgotten all about supper, and Lele, after all, had not the courage to remind her of it. She followed her step-sister upstairs without a word.

At the top of the stairs was a long hall, having several doors opening from it. To the farthest of these Jennie conducted her, and taking a key from her pocket, unlocked the door, and stood aside motioning her guest to enter.

"Here's the lamp," said she, coldly. "You'd better open the windows. Good-night."

"Could I trouble you for a pitcher of water?" Lele ventured to inquire. She could hardly keep from adding, "and a piece of bread and butter"! But Jennie's manner made such a request impossible, and Lele resolved to fast until breakfast.

Jennie went to bring the water, and Lele turned her attention to her surroundings. The room was one of those "spare rooms," papered with the rich, embossed paper of a past generation, once beautiful, but now broken and dropping from the wall in places. It was considered "fine" twenty-five or thirty years ago, but now, with its damask-curtained bed and stern-looking family portraits, like the parlor, was antiquated, and glomily suggestive of uncanny tales.

Feeling rather sick and faint, she set the lamp on the queer old-fashioned washstand and opened the windows; the air was stifling, having that close, musty smell, which always characterizes long shut-up rooms, and which had so oppressed her in the parlor.

Breathing the pure air revived her strength, but, alas! awoke her hunger keenly. Lele felt half famished. She rummaged her little telescope in vain for a morsel of candy or fruit to appease that gnawing appetite.

"I don't remember *ever* to have been so hungry," she thought.

It was the first time she had ever had such an experience as this; the world had smiled upon her hitherto.

Even at school she had been well cared for and happy. And here, in her father's house, she was denied not only the affectionate welcome she had been led to expect, but food when she was hungry! Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong. She began to believe that the old gossip at the station had told the truth about the Fairfaxes.

Lele knelt before one of the windows, rested her chin on her folded arms, and gazed at the stars that shone down from heaven like friendly eyes. Nature was in her most benignant mood to-night, and the tired and home-sick girl was soothed by it. The warm air, drenched with the perfume of rose and honeysuckle, came to her like a benediction of the night.

CHAPTER IV.

Procuring Refreshments Under Difficulties.

By the time Jennie reached the foot of the stairs her brothers and sisters were all assembled in the dining-room, deep in discussion over the merits and demerits of their visitor.

"Well, she's *pretty*, anyhow," said little Tude, as Jennie entered the room.

"Pretty, indeed!" demurred Charlie, making a wry face; he had not liked her.

"Why, I thought you were stuck on her," said Cora, in her slow, liquid tones. "You shook hands with her friendlier than any of us."

"And got snubbed for his pains!" added Jennie, as she brushed past him.

"Jen's always seeing people act snubby," observed Clem, wrinkling up his funny little nose. He was three years younger than Charlie, who was thirteen, and very much like him.

"Jen *deserves* a snubbin'," said Ed, in his gruff voice; "the way she treated Lele; set back in the corner an' never said coaly about supper!"

"Well, if that isn't a jolly go!" laughed Charlie. "Won't 'Sphixia give her any supper?"

"No, I *won't!*" said Jean, who answered to all sorts of nicknames, of which "Miss Asphyxia" was one not much to her taste.

"Why, I'd forgotten! I don't expect she *has* had any supper," cried Syd, and a look of vexation dawned in his eyes. "Jen, did you ask her?"

"You know I didn't. I don't care a copper if she starves outright."

Whereupon Ed, who had been watching her through the half-open door, slammed it and stamped moodily out on the porch.

"I wonder the plaster doesn't fall," remarked Jennie, as she poured some water into a pitcher.

"Jen, if you don't stop aggravating Ed, you'll be sorry for it one of these days," remonstrated Syd. "He wouldn't be half so bad as he is if it wasn't for you. I'd be ashamed to let that girl see what a disposition you have."

"I'm not one bit worse than the rest of you."

("Hear! hear!" said Charlie, appealing to the house in a sepulchral tone.)

"— Only you all like to throw the blame on me"—

("Poor, down-trodden Xantippe," sighed Charlie.)

"— If she comes here and tries to make Ed think he's ill treated, she'll get no palaver from me."

("No, no!" groaned Charlie.)

"— I detest her already. I never saw any one I disliked so much."

"One reason you dislike her so much is because you've treated her so mean."

"How much better have *you* treated her, I'd like to know!" flashed the angry girl. "Didn't I beg you boys to go to the station for her, and you every one refused?"

"Beg pardon," said Charlie. "You tried to drive the rest of us, an' we wouldn't be *driv.*"

"She hates us now as bad as she can," said Jennie, ignoring Charlie except with her eyes, which burned him like live coals, "and it's no use to smooth matters over."

"It would take a ten-pound iron to take the creases out of 'em the way they are," said the incorrigible Charlie. "I never saw matters any more wrinkled than they are at present."

"If we kept her here," Jennie went on, with a dogged persistency worthy of a better subject, "and waited on her for six weeks, there'd be a fuss at last, as there was with her Aunt Roxy, and she'd go off mad an' talk about us, as everybody does. I'd just as soon she'd leave mad to-morrow."

"If she stays for six weeks, your Markley chances will go down from par to one below zero," said Charlie. "I think you'd best not try the ironing process."

Jennie had a strong desire to empty Lele's water pitcher in Charlie's face, but desisted, and was just leaving the room when Syd called out:

"Set that pitcher down, Jen. Didn't she say she wanted a drink? You shall take her fresh water or none."

"Then I'll take her none," said Jennie, flinging

down the pitcher so roughly that the water flew out on the table.

"And you won't take her any supper?"

"*No!*" screamed Jennie.

"Then I *will*," and snatching up the pitcher, he ran out to the well, nearly knocking down Ed, who was sulking on the back porch under the grapevines.

Ed swore as usual when disturbed, and asked, grumblingly "If the house was a-fire, or had somebody fainted?"

"Neither," Syd replied, pumping furiously; "but I'm not going to let a guest suffer from hunger or thirst while I'm around."

Ed swore he wouldn't stand it to have Jennie treat Lele so.

"And I won't stand it to have my sister sworn at," retorted Syd. "You've got so coarse and profane of late that you're hardly human. You've got to mend your ways about the house or there'll be a fight, and somebody'll get licked."

"It won't be you, of course," sneered Ed.

Syd ran into the house without replying. Setting down the pitcher, he said decidedly to Cora:

"Code, get a plate and something to eat, and take it up to Lele. Be quick about it, too."

Cora began to demur in her kittenish way.

"I declare I don't believe there's anything hardly cooked," she said, opening the cupboard doors and hanging on to them with both hands. "Can I cut the cake, Jen?"

"You can if you can find it," said Jen, dryly.

"I don't believe there's any butter up," said Cora, in her soft, lazy voice, which Jennie often declared set her teeth on edge, "and I just *won't* go to the cellar. That's flat."

"She'll be in the land of dreams before you get her supper ready," said Charlie. "I often think, Cod-ak, that rather than exert yourself to stick together, you'd cheerfully fall to pieces."

"I do *believe* the beef's in the cellar, too," said Cora, yawning. "If 'tis, I'll give it up, for I'm *not* a-goin' to the cellar."

Syd swept her aside and himself proceeded to investigate the contents of the larder. His first "find" was a glass of clear, scarlet jelly. "You'll not cut that," said Jennie, angrily. "It's my currant jelly, and I won't have it touched for the likes of her."

"Oh, dear, no! that's for Joe — Markley!" sang Charlie.

"You mind your own affairs," Syd was saying, by no means gently, and taking the lamp, he descended to the cellar, where he obtained a glass of milk, some butter, some cold beef, cake and pickles. Returning somewhat mollified, he found the jelly *non est.*

"Where's the jelly?" he asked.

"I put it away," said Jennie.

Syd cut some slices of bread in ominous silence.

"He's mad," whispered Tude to Jennie. "You'd better pony up the jell. There's lightning in his eye."

"Now I want the jelly," announced the big brother, in a tone not to be disobeyed.

Jennie pointed disdainfully to the top of the sideboard.

"Where's the waiter?" next demanded Syd, as he took down the jelly.

"You seem to be the head waiter, Syd."

"I mean the tray."

"It was in the kitchen this evening," said Cora, yawning; "but, land! I don't know where it is now. There's no certain place for anything about this house."

"She *will* be in the land of dreams, sure," said Clem, plaintively, as Syd instituted a search for the tray.

"Here it is at last," sighed Syd, wearily, after looking for it in forty different places. "Now we're ready. Code, you must take this upstairs and apologize for not asking her out to supper."

"Not I," said Cora. "I don't know what excuse to offer for not asking her when she was in the parlor."

"Come, make up something," Syd exclaimed, impatiently.

"I'll not go a step. That's flat," said Cora, who could be obstinate enough when she tried.

"That's *sharp,* you mean," said Charlie. "I see Syd is going to relieve you of all responsibility on account of inefficiency. You take after your pa, Codak."

"Jen must take it for me, then," said Syd.

"I *won't!*" said Jen.

Syd looked at her fixedly.

"If you force me to take it, I'll throw it in her face!" cried Jennie.

"I won't go either," said Cora, bracing herself against the wall with arms firmly locked behind her. "I'm tired of doing things that she won't do."

Charlie was appealed to.

Charlie wouldn't go. If he went (grasping the extension table upon which he was perched), that table would go, too. He guessed Clem was the right one to send. Clem evinced *his* unwillingness to oblige by hiding in the kitchen.

"Well, I'll be hanged if I ever saw such a family!" cried poor Syd, in despair.

"We're unique, that's flat, as Cora says," said Charlie, highly enjoying the situation. "Give it up, Syd, an' let's divide around. It would make pretty good cuttin' after all the fuss."

"She'd think it odd for *me* to take her supper up to her room," mused Syd; "but I've got to go if no one else will."

"Yes, Syd, you'd better go," cried the irrepressible Charlie, stretching himself out flat on the extension table, with his face on one arm and a queer little twinkle in his bright eyes. "You might thus get into her good graces (as the stranger walked off with the silver candlestick in grandad's reader) and win her — money an' marry her. Then you could pay off the mortgage an' send us kids to college. We'll never learn any manners here, with a mortgage hangin' low enough over us to rub us bald-headed."

"Hold your tongue, Charlie. Your pertness"— Syd could hardly speak. He thought if Charlie were his son, how differently the boy should address him. "Marry my step-sister! Pooh! You don't know what you are talking about," he went on, sharply. Yet they all observed that his color rose.

Ed had pushed the door partly open and was regarding him with a lowering glance. He now strode into the room and caught hold of the tray.

"*Ill* take this up to her," he said, hoarsely. "I don't know which is the worst, bad dealing or double-dealing. You're all a rocky set, *you* are, ax to grind, or no ax."

"Stop! Explain yourself!" exclaimed Syd. "Do you mean to hint that I've been kind to your sister from interested motives?"

"I do *that.* You know she'll have money when she marries. I ought to have half of it, but I'll never get a penny of it, and you — curse you! — expect to scoop the whole pile."

The color had died out of Syd's cheeks and left him in one of his white rages, before which even Jennie trembled.

"Ed Fairfax, you lie!" he said. "If it were not for that girl upstairs, I'd make you eat your words, you scoundrel!"

Ed set the tray upon the table and faced about, livid with passion.

"Oh, I'm a scoundrel and liar, am I? And 'that girl upstairs' would be a nobody if you had not set

yourself to work to get her money. You threatened to thrash me, too, a while ago. Well, to-morrow morning, when we go out to work, we'll settle accounts."

"All right, sir. Only don't first prime yourself with bad whisky, for I won't fight either a madman or a drunken fool."

Ed's nostrils quivered. A sort of convulsion passed over his face. Then like a flash he caught up the knife that lay on Lele's plate.

"Take that back, —— you, or I'll cut your —— heart out!" he shouted. Little Tude screamed and ran instinctively toward her favorite, Syd, while even Clem and Charlie appeared somewhat concerned. Cora began to sob in wishy-washy terror, but Jennie relieved the situation by stepping up behind Ed and catching his uplifted arm.

"Don't disgrace yourself and the family any further, for pity's sake, Ed," she said, in tones of scorn, which, for once, fell like cold water on fire. "And as for you, Syd, if you had one spark of manliness, you would keep out of a fight to-night."

Ed turned his dull eyes moodily upon her, but he dropped the knife, and Syd, too, turned away.

"You begun it."

"I know it, and I bitterly regret it," Jennie spoke, in a stifled voice, shaking with resolutely repressed sobs.

Syd went out on the porch at that, for it somehow brought a lump into his throat to see Jennie so perturbed. And in his own consciousness he felt utterly depressed.

"This whole world is as black as hades!" he thought, "and I am the most miserable dog in it."

Ed also left the room, and presently they heard him stumbling upstairs through the dark.

"He'll fall down and smash everything, and she'll starve after all," said Cora, tearfully.

"Maybe cut his throat with the knife or gouge his eyes out with the fork," added Tude, whose eyes were round with apprehension.

"Or still more likely," from Charlie, "run a spoon into his ear and split his brain into four hemi-demi-spheres instead of two. Clem, my son, art thou not also one of the prophets?"

Jen's voice had the old impatient ring when she exclaimed:

"Charlie Fairfax, how often have I told you not to sit on that table? You know you'll likely break the casters."

"I don't know exactly how often," Charlie replied; "but if you go to hittin' me with the broom, I'll give a bounce that will shatter ever' caster into beads, sure as shootin'."

"Charlie, get up," said Jennie, half-entreatingly. "I'm so tired I'm fairly sick. I want you to get to bed and give me a little peace."

"No use. There's that girl upstairs to make you tired in the morning," drumming on the table just to hear Jen say it made her nervous. Charlie dearly loved to tease his irritable sister.

"Jen, you forgot to salt the butter," suggested Cora, in the midst of the odious drumming.

"Oh, botheration! There's always something left undone. It will just have to *go.*"

"There's none for breakfast."

"Well, I suppose I'll *have* to salt it, then. Where's the dairy salt?"

"Can't prove it by me," said Cora, yawning.

"Oh, you never know anything!"

"Code's brain power is *thunderous* little," said Charlie. "Only one remove from idiocy."

"Lucky you've got brains to spare," said Cora, with perfect good humor. "The only trouble is that you've got too much brain for one an' not enough for two."

Jennie put a stop to the talk by saying:

"Cora, you go upstairs and put Tude to bed while I salt the butter. You boys, go too. I want the lamp."

Syd now came in off the porch with the inquiry:

"Ed come down yet?"

"No."

"What the dicks is keeping him so long?"

"Don't know; telling her everything he knows, probably. You would be wise to go to bed without saying anything more to him to-night."

"Thanks. Superfluous advice is selling at a low figure, Jinsey; market glutted."

While Jennie was salting the butter, Syd came down to the cellar and sat on an empty barrel watching her. Suddenly he burst out:

"I say, Jinks, there's got to be a new order of things about this house."

"So you say fifty times a year. Much good it does to say it."

"This confounded wrangling must be stopped," getting up and walking nervously about. "It's enough to drive a man mad to have so much blamed worry out of doors and *in*, too. It really is. I tell you I can't bear it."

"Well, how is it on a girl? Do you think it particularly pleasant to see you boys quarrel the way you do? Drunk or sober, you are equally ready to fly into a passion at the least provocation."

"Be exact, young lady. *I* am never drunk," he spoke, haughtily.

"The only reason you don't drink is because you hate the taste of liquor."

"I have no principles, then?"

"Principles, I guess, wouldn't hold you long in check if you *wanted* to drink."

"Jen, you're the kind of sister to drive a fellow into dissipation," replied Syd, moodily. "You never give one of us credit for anything good. If we are better in some respects than others, it is because we are made so, and can't be different. Believe me, Jennie, if I don't drink even hard cider, it isn't because I don't like it. I like the taste of it too well. You know from whom I inherited it, perhaps."

Jennie was silent. Her father had died before she

could remember, but people had told her that it was drink that did it.

"I've tried to do right for — *her* sake. You might have helped me more, Jinsey."

The girl's head sank. She knew he was referring to his dead mother, whom he had deeply loved. Life seemed to have gone all wrong with both of them since her death, two years ago.

"Well, Syd, I *am* mean, I know, but it is chiefly because I am so disheartened, and have so little to live for. And it doesn't seem right for other girls to be so happy while I"—

Two great tears splashed on the rude table beside the butter bowl. Jennie bit her lips until they bled to keep them from quivering, as she pounded the solid Jersey butter, sending little sprinkles of brine all over Syd's coat. He withdrew a few steps, mindful that his Sunday coat was not likely to appear less seedy after a baptism of buttermilk and salt.

"I know, Jinsey," he said, gently, "that your life has not been bright. Neither, for that matter, has mine. But what good comes of all this wrangling in one's family? I like peace at home, and no home can ever be peaceful without a sweet-tempered woman to smooth matters and preserve the domestic equilibrium. If mother had only lived!"

"It isn't my fault that I am incapable of filling her place, Syd. I was born with the fiery McKnight temper, while you are far more like mamma than I can ever be. Though I'm sure you would make a bad job

of controlling Ed, if he was thrown entirely on your hands."

"I admit that; but, my dear *Jenkins*, won't you try, if only for a week, to be — milder? The way you have acted this evening toward Lele was perfectly dreadful."

Jean replied doggedly that "Lele didn't seem very friendly. She could see at a glance that she meant to walk over her (Jennie) first chance she got."

"Oh, Jenkins! You are perpetually seeing unfriendly people who are trying to walk over you. Did you ever meet a pretty girl that you liked? Now, be honest about it. *Did* you?"

"If you think Lele Fairfax a pretty girl, I commend your taste!"

"*Your* taste would have been best displayed by meeting her with sisterly kindness, and giving her the welcome home she had a right to expect."

"You would have greeted her with a kiss, I suppose?"

"Yes; if I had been a girl, I should."

"Perhaps you did, out in the lane."

"I might have done so, for she took me for Ed. Sorry now I didn't. I may never have the opportunity again."

"Silly boy!"

"It would be very pleasant to have such a sweet-looking girl presiding over one's home."

"What would the gossips say?"

"Don't know, or care — *much*."

"Yes, you do care. A man or woman who will marry just for money — as you would if you married Lele — is beneath anybody's contempt."

"Your philosophy is all right, Jinsey, but, as the world goes, awfully out of date. There's Mr. Markley, now, who wants you for a wife. He's got a lot of money. You'd be better off with him than you ever will here, for, as I've heard you say, single women are nobodies, and so, for that matter, are single men. There is no happiness on earth away from one's own fireside."

"I wonder what happiness you think there would be for me by Mr. Markley's fireside!"

"You'd soon get used to the sight of his bald head and broken nose, and eventually regard him as the dearest"—

"Bargain I ever bought. No, thank you. One mercenary marriage in a family is quite enough."

CHAPTER V.

Ed.

When Ed reached the open door of his sister's room, he saw her kneeling before one of the open windows, and thought at first that she was crying. With an inward oath he wished he had stayed away, for of all things he detested cry-babies worst; and, besides, was it *his* fault that she was ill treated? Why didn't she stay away, anyhow? She might have known nobody wanted her. He felt bitter toward her himself, because she had inherited money half of which ought to have come to him. He had not intended to stand up for her rights at first, and had it not been that every slur cast upon her seemed partly a reflection on himself, he would, perhaps, have resented her intrusion more strongly than any of them.

While these thoughts flashed through his mind, his sister rose and turned to him with a startled glance, which quickly gave place to an expression of delight.

"Why, Ed, how did you ever think of bringing me my supper?" she cried, in a voice so sweet and full of gratitude that Ed was softened. "Thank you, ever so much."

Ed mumbled bashfully:

"I 'lowed you hadn't had any supper, maybe. Where'll I set this tray?"

Lele took it from him, saying brightly:

"I'm so glad you brought it, for I'm perfectly ravenous."

"Hope there'll be enough," said Ed, moving irresolutely toward the door. "It's nothin' but a snack."

"Lunch, he means, I suppose," thought Lele. "Yes, indeed; thank you. How nice of you to fix it up for me, Ed. Boys are not apt to be so thoughtful. But I suppose the girls did it."

"Not much they didn't," burst out Ed. "They don't take a little bit of a shine to you, Lele."

"I'm sorry." There was the brightness of unshed tears in the brown eyes, but no decided indications of a scene such as Ed feared. Her calm way of accepting the situation suited him exactly.

"Tell me, while I eat my supper, what I've done," she added.

"You've got some sense, I see," he replied; "an' bein' as you've got sense — even if you *are* a seminary girl — I don't mind tellin' you that you've got into a hornet's nest."

"What have I done to merit being stung?" asked Lele, helping herself to some of the contested jelly.

"It's no difference whether you've done anything. Jen don't like you, an' she rules the roast at Fairfax farm."

"Indeed!"

"There's one fellow that won't stand her rulin' much longer, confound her."

"Whom do you mean, Ed?"

"Why, I mean *me,* by gosh! I'm tryin' not to swear, Lele," he added, apologetically, "but I'll swan if the way things go here ain't enough to make a preacher swear. By jing! she's a tyrant."

"What's the matter between you and Jean, Ed?"

"She doesn't like me 'cause I'm no kin to her, an', by gum! she never misses a chance to give me a dig with that infernal long tongue of hers. Pretty soon I intend to cut stick."

"Cut *what?*"

"Clear out, vamoosh, skeedaddle; put a thousand miles of thin air between myself an' this dog-onned ole farm," explained Ed, lucidly.

"Where are you going?"

Ed gave a short laugh.

"To the ole Nick, I expect. I might as well be there as here."

"I should think you would find the difference considerable," said Lele. "You ought to be thankful you're alive."

"I'm not, though." Ed looked moody and sullen.

"How strange you should all be so unhappy!" mused the girl. "I have always fancied it would be the sweetest thing on earth to have brothers and sisters to confide in and help. But for my aunt's opposition to the idea, I would have tried to establish friendly relations with you all long ago."

"She must have been an old screw," commented Ed.

"She was the dearest friend I ever had," said Lele, impulsively. "I miss her inexpressibly, and never more than — to-night." The red lips trembled, but Lele valiantly battled with the tears, and kept them back.

"I 'low you'll be kind of uncomfortable here," said Ed, shifting from one foot to the other. "We're like cats an' dogs. But what's the odds? I won't be here long, an' neither will you, if you're smart."

"Ed, do tell me where you think of going?"

"No matter. Eat your supper an' don't bother your head about me."

"But I just *will* bother my head about you. You're the only real brother I've got in this world, and I want you to know I love you. I want you to prosper, too, and be happy."

"You're very kind," said Ed, whose heart for a moment felt a thrill of tenderness for this sweet, new-found sister.

"Do you like farming?"

"No, I *don't*. By gum, I hate it worse than snakes!"

"What do you like — machinery?"

"What made you guess that?"

"I heard it in some way. Now, if you are sure you can't make a successful farmer"—

"Successful farmer! I rather guess not. I saw a picture of a man with a hoe once that seemed just about the most discouraged lookin' dog I'd seen lately. He'd been hounded to his tasks till he hadn't hardly sense enough to go in when it rained. I said then that before

THE MAN WITH THE HOE

AFTER MILLET

I'd turn out such a specimen, I'd split my head open."

Lele smiled at this *naive* confession, and asked:

"Then why don't you educate yourself as a civil engineer or machinist?"

"Why don't Jack eat his supper?" growled Ed.

Lele looked mystified.

"I mean you can't buy an education with a pocket full of burdock-burrs. You've got to have money, an' we've had none ahead since I can remember."

Lele pondered, eating very slowly.

"Couldn't you work your way somehow?" she finally asked.

"I've got no chance," said Ed, bitterly.

"A boy can make opportunities if he will."

"Pap won't let me off," said Ed. "He says I've got to nigger here on this ole place till I'm twenty-one. I'd rather be in the Black Hole."

"Andrew Johnson never learned to read fluently until after he was twenty-one; and he found time after that to discharge the duties of President. I think there's hope for you, Ed. And remember, a boyhood spent on the farm is often the best foundation for a successful, honorable manhood. He is almost sure to be kept away from the temptations that assail city boys."

Ed became crimson. He wondered what she would think when she discovered that he had formed about all the bad habits a fellow can pick up anywhere.

"I guess I'll go," he said, in desperation, for he felt as if he were being impaled.

"No, wait and get the tray. I'm not through talk-

ing, Ed." Her tone became more confidential. "I'm only a woman, and can't expect to do much to make a stir in the world. But I do so much *want* to be the sister of a great man, such as Morse or Edison or Eli Whitney, for instance. A man who invents a cotton-gin or sewing machine is as truly great as one capable of electrifying Congress, or the world, for that matter, with his eloquence. If it were all summed up, I doubt not that Elias Howe outranked Henry Clay in usefulness."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Ed.

"Lincoln at twenty-one was a rail-splitter, with no more apparent chance for Presidential honors than you have. What carried him to the White House, elevated Stephenson above common artisans, and gave Elihu Burritt the name of 'Learned Blacksmith'?"

"Brains," said Ed, shortly. "I've none."

"Then your skull is filled with air and *not* with gray and white matter. I assure you the shape of it is fine. Didn't you learn arithmetic all right?"

"Yes, and that was every d— (excuse me) thing I could learn. Everybody thinks me stupid. Father tells with a sneer, every chance he gets, that I'm fit only for farming, and not half fit for that."

"Even fathers are sometimes mistaken in estimating a child's abilities," said Lele, calmly. "Ed, tell me truly, haven't you a fondness for mechanics?"

"I've fooled with wheels a good deal," he admitted, as though forced to confess something of which he was half ashamed. "But I've never made 'em work right.

Nothing ever does for me. I'm a sort of crooked sixpence. Sometimes I wish't I'd fell in the fireplace an' burnt up 'fore I was a year old. Then I'd have been out of the way for good an' all." He looked, now, pitiably despondent.

"Don't say such things, Ed. You're young yet — only eighteen. Walter Scott's prospects for fame were small indeed when he was your age. Don't you remember how he was considered the dunce of his school?"

"I thought he was a genius," said Ed, sullenly.

"Genius often lies dormant for many a year. You may, yourself, possess it in some form. Only your visionary, who dreams his life away, amounts to nothing."

"Work is one of the things I hate," said Ed. "And so would you if you had much of it to do."

"I expect to do quite a good deal of work in my time, Ed," said Lele, smiling. "Busy people are the happiest, and I have never yet seen an idle person whose imaginary woes were not harder to bear than the real ones of the worker. Money alone is worth far less to any man than work and patience and a fixed purpose in life."

The gleam of intelligence that brightened strangely the boy's dull, opaque face showed that there was a better nature within which could be roused.

"I might study to be a machinist," he began, "if I had"— but stopped short before he reached the word "money," set his teeth in his under lip, and scowled. The momentary brightness left his face. His bitter-

ness against the sister who had inherited the sum that would have rendered him independent returned, and with it his anger against Syd. He gazed moodily out at the glimmering stars that shone through the tree tops, and was silent.

"I'll help you all I can, Ed," said Lele, in a tone full of sweet, sympathetic cadence.

"You can't if you marry — *him*."

"Whom?"

"Syd."

"*Syd!*"

"Precisely."

"Who suggested such a preposterous thing?"

Ed swallowed one or two scruples ere he replied:

"He's fairly spread himself this evening tryin' to make Jin an' everybody treat you well so you will stay. And when Charlie accused him to his face of angling for your money, he colored up and hadn't the grace to deny it."

Lele fortunately had finished her supper. After this she could not have eaten another morsel.

"He'll never marry *me*," she said, looking both hurt and angry.

"All girls are fools," declared Ed; "seminary girls worse than any other. If he'd ask you to marry him, so he could get your money to help pay off the mortgage, you'd think it romantic to do it. And, by gum, you *would* be sold!"

"He'll never *dare* ask me!" cried Lele, glowing with anger.

"I suppose I shouldn't have told you," said Ed, relenting. "But I wasn't going to have you walk into a trap blindfold."

"I am sorry he is so dishonorable," said Lele, stiffly. "I should never have suspected it."

"I didn't suppose you had much penetration; girls never have. They need somebody around to look after their interests. And I guess if I don't look after yours, you'll be *left* for a protector. Father will be dead sure to favor your marrying Syd if he sees the fellow wants you. He always *is* in for somebody to pay his debts for him, no odds how or who. He was awfully cut up when Maud St. John wouldn't have Syd, because the St. Johns have money, and could have helped him."

"Syd wanted to marry Miss St. John!"

"Well, I should think so — *rather!* She used to like Syd before she went to boarding-school, but her head was so full of 'high society,' when she got home, that she couldn't find a thought for old Syd. He took it awful hard, and if he ever marries, it will be as much to show Maud that she isn't the *only* girl in the world as anything else."

Ed mercifully interrupted his flow of eloquence here and hurried away, but with this parting remark:

"Hope you'll sleep well, Lele. A man committed suicide in this room once, and they say he still — *walks!*"

CHAPTER VI.

Lele's First Day at the Farm.

Syd had been sincere in repelling Charlie's suggestion about marrying Lele for her money; he had never until that moment thought of such a thing, and the anger roused by Ed's accusation was perfectly genuine. But as Charlie spoke it had occurred to him, almost with the force of an electric shock, that the most perplexing question of his life might thus be solved. Here was a fresh-hearted, unsophisticated young girl, just out of school, having been purposely kept out of society until her education should be completed. He did not suppose she had ever had a lover; he knew she had inherited just the sum of money he needed to make him master of this farm, to give him standing among his neighbors, and help him toward lifelong independence. Resentment against Ed only strengthened the impression already formed, and after the quarrel, which might have resulted seriously had not Jean interfered, he had almost resolved upon a course of action.

His prospects, as he felt, were desperately bad, and for years had been growing worse, rather than better.

The farm was heavily mortgaged, and what with bad seasons, bad tenants, and injudicious management on the part of his step-father, Syd had never, with his

utmost efforts, been able to save anything for himself. Only to keep the interest and taxes paid was a heavy drain on his resources. Long ago it had become fully apparent that Mr. Fairfax would never be able to repay the $5,000 he had borrowed from his thrifty neighbor, Silas Collins. And since the farm must be sold sooner or later, Syd had cherished a secret hope of buying in the place himself. But even at the early age of twenty-one he had become convinced that he could not, hampered as he was, expect to earn enough in a lifetime *here* to buy a farm; a bitter disappointment, for he had grown deeply attached to the home his mother's presence had hallowed, and which he and Jennie had done so much to beautify. He could not bear to see it pass into the hands of such a man as Si Collins. The only hope he now had was to borrow money enough to buy it in, living the rest of his life, perhaps, under the shadow of a mortgage; past experience made him shrink from that.

Then came, quite suddenly, the subtle temptation: "Why not marry a woman with money enough to buy it?" Lele had money enough, he knew; and why not marry her, if she could be won?

Syd was hampered by a rash promise that he had made to his dying mother — an agreement never to abandon her children until they were able to sustain themselves. She had commended them to his care rather than to that of Mr. Fairfax, the latter being notoriously improvident.

After Jean went upstairs that night, Syd put on his

cap and sauntered down the road toward St. John's. It was a cloudless summer night, and soft airs were blowing over the meadows on either hand, sweet with the perfume of white clover. He thought of nights like this when he had walked with Maud under the stars, in the happy days when she was a school girl, not much better off than himself, and well content to have him by her side. A legacy from a rich uncle and boarding-school life together seemed to have turned the girl's head. He was nothing to her now.

There was a pretty white house just ahead. That was where Maud lived. He passed it walking slowly, his eyes strained for a glimpse of her. From the parlor windows beamed a rosy light. The hall door stood open. There were some young people on the veranda, and he heard the sound of gay voices and merry laughter. He went on moodily, with his head down. Suddenly he paused and listened. Among the voices on the veranda he could distinguish that of Ward Collins, once his dearest friend, now his dearest foe. He hurried on with long strides, breathing in the scented summer air in deep breaths. Out of "earshot" he paused again and looked back longingly, then he went on again. Not many months ago he had been a frequent visitor at the St. John's; but he never went there now. He had some time during the previous winter awoke to the fact that a man's worldly prospects figure very prominently sometimes in an affair of the heart. Since that disheartening discovery he had paid Maud no more visits; but it would have elated the little coquette

could she have known how frequently she had been in his thoughts, notwithstanding.

That he had lost all faith in Maud mattered little. He could not forget that she had been his ideal. Syd had never cared to "go with the girls," as the other young men of his age did. And he was generally thought to be completely indifferent to the fair sex. Men of his type, however, find life without love all but impossible. When one idol is shattered, they set up another. But their worship is often so secret that the object of it is unconscious of her supremacy. Worldly status is of first importance in the eyes of these conservative men. If they can not attain what they deem "independence" in money matters. they never marry, notwithstanding their domestic tastes, and the heart-hunger that is with them always.

On his way home to-night Syd observed two figures bending over the gate at St. John's. Maud's laugh softly echoed the coaxing tones of Ward's voice. Then Syd heard him kiss her. He nearly ran to get out of their presence, the blood beating in his ears.

When he got home that night he sat down on the top step of the veranda, first picking up absently a violet-scented lace handkerchief which Lele must have lost. He held the dainty snow-white thing which her little hand had crushed, but not soiled, a moment, and then laid it carefully on a chair behind him. He did not care to entertain certain thoughts of Lele in the presence of anything that reminded him so vividly of her sweet and trusting nature. He would gladly have for-

gotten the girl while he considered plans for obtaining her money.

The hours went by as he sat there thinking — nine, ten, eleven, twelve, *one!* Still the wind whispered "peace" among the lofty tree boughs, and honeysuckles shook their perfumed bells above him. But there was no peace for him. Only a blind rage that he, who, of all men, wished to keep his honor bright, must stoop to such petty knavery as he was planning. He hated himself for it, hated the life he was forced to live, and, above all, hated his step-father for wasting the inheritance which should have come to him and Jean.

The clock on the sitting-room mantle chimed two, and Syd rose and went upstairs. But even then the dawn was breaking before he slept. He did not, as usual, look at his mother's picture. Rather he avoided it.

At breakfast he had that guilty, constrained feeling which a naturally honest, straightforward man feels when acting for the first time from unworthy motives. He thought Lele's manner a trifle cool; still she was perfectly polite, though at times when his eyes met hers she reddened as if with anger, or some feeling near akin to it.

Probably Ed had betrayed him.

* * * * * *

Notwithstanding the evening's experiences and her disturbing talk with Ed, Lele was so tired that she fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. To-morrow would be soon enough to lament

over family troubles and reflect upon the unwelcome insinuations concerning Syd.

For a moment or two after waking she lay among her pillows in thoughtless comfort, rubbing her eyes drowsily and still fancying herself at the seminary, listening for the rising bell. Then as she grew wider awake, she looked up, and saw opposite the unfamiliar east window, through which the summer dawn came rosily. She felt strangely disturbed in mind, though she could not at first recall just what had occurred to distract her peace. Then remembering that she was in her old home, she buried her face in the pillow with a long-drawn sigh. Thousands of times she had pictured waking up in the lovely, care-free, soul-reviving country to the tune of song-sparrows, Pennsylvania mocking-birds, and a whole galaxy of sweet, winged singers. She had been warned many times not to miss the daybreak concert in the tree tops, but now — what sound smote her ear? It was like unto the frying of a thousand beefsteaks, only the sound was wafted downward rather than up. She sprang to the window imbued with the fear that the roof was in flames and every shingle crackling. The mystery was quickly explained. Innumerable blackbirds, that had sought shelter in the big elm trees near her window, were bidding each other "good-morning" in tones that could aptly be likened to the snipping of all the sheep-shears in that part of the State, intermingled with the frying of at least a whole village full of sizzling steaks and chops. Lele hastily closed the window and plunged

back into the billowy feather-bed, with her fingers thrust into her ears.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" she thought; "the very birds of Fairfax farm are in a racket." Then she began to laugh, and feeling very much as though there might be a stove foundry in full blast somewhere under that voluminous canopy, she got out and opened the window again. Instantly a whole swarm of blackbirds, that seemed just ready for breakfast, flew up into the sky like bees, sending a black shadow across the window as they ascended with a whirr of wings like the roar of an express train. Not a song-bird of any kind could be seen or heard.

"Disillusion No. 2," thought Lele; "discomforts *do* exist in the country as well as in the town — most unexpected ones, too. Whoever would have thought of the very birds becoming a nuisance!"

Now that her thoughts came back to the events of the previous evening, she recalled her conversation with Ed, and how Syd had figuratively tumbled off the pedestal she had reared for him. She felt for him an uncontrollable repugnance.

"And I thought him so nice, too!" she mused. "How kind and considerate he seemed! One little knows what an act is worth until one knows the motive that prompted it. Willing to marry just anybody, is he? since his girl's gone back on him. Oh, if Aunt Roxy could have lived to hear that!"

It occurred to her that Syd might find out that he had been betrayed, and would show her only brotherly

attentions at first, or even treat her with assumed indifference, in order that he might "catch her heart in the rebound." So she resolved to treat him exactly as she did the rest, and not let him suspect that all his schemes had been discovered.

"He's a very ordinary looking fellow," she reflected, consolingly. "I'll be in no danger of falling in love with him, I guess, though, I've had so few beaux in my time that I'm pretty susceptible. But I like his looks, and there's something fascinating in his manner. Is it his apparent strength, his easy figure, or the chivalrous way he looks at you from under his straight, dark brows? I don't know. I do know, however, that if" —

The breakfast bell rang. Lele went down. There was no one visible to show her to the dining-room, and she paused irresolutely at an open door, through which she heard voices. One was Syd's, speaking angrily:

"Jen, why don't you go up and bring her down? It's unpardonable to leave her to find her way alone. *Do* show her that much courtesy."

"She'll find her way easily enough," said Jennie, sharply. "This house is not a labyrinth; and as for courtesy, you'll be less gallant yourself when you find she's engaged to some one else."

Lele, determined to hear no more, advanced through the sitting-room, and in a moment found herself in the presence of the brother and sister who had been discussing her. The breakfast table was set; Jennie, with a plum branch, was keeping off the flies, and Syd was

leaning on the mantle twisting a lamp-lighter between nervous fingers. He flushed up to the roots of his hair as his eyes met Lele's, perfectly aware that she had heard Jennie's last remark. But he did not utter a word of greeting until after Jennie, with a cold "Good-morning," disappeared in the kitchen; then he contrived to express a hope that she had slept well and experienced no inconvenience from her long walk.

"I slept very well, thank you," said Lele, cheerfully, though *her* cheeks were burning, too, "and experienced no inconvenience — until the blackbirds woke up."

"The miscreants roosted in the elms last night, did they? I have been driving them from pillar to post for weeks, but they seem to get bolder and more numerous every day. All our song-birds are leaving us because of them."

"Breakfast is ready," said Jennie, tersely. "Sit down," and again she vanished into the kitchen, bringing back with her some hot biscuits and a plate of fried ham.

Lele had intended to enliven the breakfast hour by giving a humorous account of the impressions produced on her mind by the blackbirds, but found it impossible.

A vexed, disappointed expression had settled upon Jennie's face when she saw that Lele had chanced to seat herself by Syd, rather than Ed, where there was a vacant place evidently reserved for her guest. Nothing was said, but that one glance took all the flavor out of the ham and made her feel as if the biscuits would choke her.

"Evidently she doesn't encourage romantic notions on either side," thought Lele. "She doesn't want me in *her* family under any circumstances. And do I seem to be angling for Syd? Heaven forbid that anything so foreign to my intentions should appear possible!"

No one seemed inclined to talk. Ed had sat sulky and preoccupied from the first; the little boys never opened their mouths except when their elbows moved, and Lele felt that conversation under that Gorgon eye of Jean's was out of the question.

Finally curiosity prompted Charlie to inquire the meaning of a little silver cross which she wore.

"It's the emblem of my Order," said Lele, smiling. "I am a King's Daughter."

"What in the world is it for — the Order, I mean?" asked Cora, addressing Lele for the first time.

"Just to encourage people to do little things every day to make each other happy."

Silence again. A smile of pure amusement hovered around the corners of Syd's mouth.

"I think we'll all have to join the Order," he said, looking mischievously at Jennie, who turned her head aside with a gesture of disdain.

"For pure rudeness Jennie takes the ribbon every time," thought Lele; "she's 'one of 'em' that I've always heard of, but never expected to see. May her tribe decrease."

Every one was relieved when Jennie gave the signal for rising. The boys trooped off toward the barn, the girls to the kitchen, and Lele, not knowing exactly what

to do with herself, went out to the veranda, feeling completely lost.

"I feel like Alice in Wonderland," she thought; "and the animals get curiouser and curiouser. I should not be surprised if they would bundle me into a passing carriage and send me back to the station this morning. If they do, I shall never be able to face Sophie Howard again. It would be too mortifying. I believe if they attempt to get rid of me by force, that I'll kick like the mischief, to use one of Sophie's dreadfulest phrases. But the question is, Am I as strong as all of them? Perhaps not, but I mean to put up the best fight I can."

She walked around looking at the flowers and talking to the cats and chickens to keep her heart from going clear down into her boots.

"Oh, just think of Lele Fairfax marrying Syd McKnight and living here!" she kept saying to herself. "Why, I should be dead or petrified in less than six months."

Footsteps were heard in the hall. She looked around and saw Ed approaching, walking as usual, mostly on his heels and jarring the whole house.

"Say, Lele, I expect you think I was sort of snaggy at breakfast," he said, in a tone meant to be apologetic. "I 'lowed to be pleasanter, but Jinks, confound her! put me all out o'-whack."

"How, my dear boy?"

"Oh, no odds!" snapping off some honeysuckle buds and throwing them away impatiently. "She swooped upstairs an' eavesdropped, I guess. Jen's got

an awful spite at you some way, and you'd best keep out of her track. Don't offer to do anything, or you'll have a racket on your hands, that's all."

"Never mind about me, Ed; I'll get along," said Lele, easily. "All I ask is that you won't quarrel with Syd while I'm here."

"You're afraid he'll get hurt," said Ed, suspiciously.

"No; I sized you both up this morning, and it's my opinion that Syd could knock you out in one round, perhaps kill you with a blow. And, Ed, I'd so much rather not attend a trial while I'm here. I hate trials."

Ed laughed.

"I'll get you up some other amusements, then," he said.

"And if you want to learn a trade, remember I'll help you all I can."

He went away looking brighter, but if the truth must be told, very far from attractive. Lele could have wept, now that she saw him in the broad light of day, when she realized how coarse, how lacking in refinement, he was. Every trace of the dimpled, fair-haired child had been lost in the rough, uncultured youth. She felt that it would be really hard for even *her* to love such a brother, and did not so much blame Jennie. Nothing but the grace of God could make two such natures harmonize in the daily family intercourse. And yet Lele pitied him unspeakably. If she could only make something of him after all!

She felt very solitary this morning. The girls were too busy to talk to her, it seemed, and she felt almost

afraid in the big, empty rooms. She kept thinking of her father, wondering why he did not come home. Did he know what a reception she would receive? Did he care? Would he treat her as the others did? Was she nothing to *him* either? Lele had expected to stay at least several weeks, but this morning she made a resolve in sober earnest to cut it down (or up, if Jen summoned a carriage!) to ten days. This was one. There would be nine more to endure. Nine solitary days among unfriendly people; nine dreadful nights in the haunted chamber; three times nine fearful meals with that Gorgon-like girl presiding over the teacups!

The prospect sickened her. Ignoring Ed's advice, she went down stairs again, resolved at all hazards to establish friendly relations with Jennie; otherwise life here would be unendurable.

Meanwhile Cora, up to her elbows in dishwater, was saying:

"Jin, what made you look so queer when she took the plate next to Syd this morning?"

"Oh, you know well enough," said Jennie, who was bending over the hot stove with flame-colored cheek. "I'd fixed a plate for her over by Ed, an' put a scoured knife for her to eat with. But I forgot to tell her which place to take, and she got the wrong one, of course. It *always* happens so!"

"I noticed she had an old black knife, one of them run-off ones," said Cora, "and thought you had given it to her a-purpose. Do look at that fly-trap, Jin! It's as full as it can stick," dabbing her hands in the water,

quite unmindful of the flight of time and of the number of utensils yet unwashed.

"Never mind the fly-trap," cried the elder sister, impatiently. "Why don't you hurry up and get through, so you can go talk to her? I never saw anybody as slow as you are."

"Why don't you go in, then, if you're so fast?" drawled Cora.

Jennie flew hither and thither trying to do two or three kinds of work at once in order to make up for Cora's slowness.

"You know I never have a minute to sit down until after dinner," she said, nervously. "Do go 'long an' put on another dress, so you'll be fit to be seen. It distracts me to have you poking around. I believe I can do more work when you're not with me."

"I wish I'd known that long ago," said Cora. "I've tired myself dreadfully tryin' to help you, Jinsey," rather wistfully.

"I don't think you are likely to cripple yourself with hard work," said Jennie. "But now I wish you'd go in an' show her your quilt, or do something to keep her from pokin' her nose into everything. Hang her! I wish I knew when she was goin' away."

"Hush! she's out on the back porch, an' I'll bet you a cookie she's heard every word," whispered Cora.

Jennie turned scarlet with vexation. Her dislike for Lele increased when she thought the latter had overheard her ungracious wish. In reality Lele had not distinguished a word, though she knew as soon as

she saw the two girls that they had been talking about her. And she unconsciously added to Jennie's ire by saying:

"Girls, haven't you something I can do? I'm used to being busy, and I don't know what to do with myself."

"She wants to let us know that she notices we haven't got time to talk to her," thought Jennie, resentfully. So she said, coldly:

"No, thank you; we don't need any help. If you want something to read, I'll get you a book." She paused as though struck by a sudden thought, and added: "Ed has a good many books and papers in his room. I'll show you the room, and you can get what you like best;" then with a little chilly, derisive smile, "but don't disturb the wheels."

Lele did not like to intrude upon the privacy of her brother's room, but thinking he would not be offended if she left everything as she found it, she followed Jennie upstairs.

Like Syd, Jen walked splendidly, with her shoulders thrown back and her head erect. There was something truly dramatic in her attitude as she threw open the door of her brother's apartment and pointed scornfully within.

"I want you, if you can, to tell me how to turn this Purgatory into a Paradise," she said, and Lele saw large tears glisten for a moment in the flashing dark eyes as the discouraged young housekeeper turned away.

It was a curious apartment, half workshop, half bedroom, and indescribably disorderly. There was no carpet, no wall paper; neither curtain nor blind to shade the windows, though an old coat was stretched half way across one window, and a piece of rag carpet served as a screen for the other.

In one corner of the room was a four-post cedar bedstead, infirm with age. The bed-clothes were ragged, the linen soiled, the floor littered with shavings and scraps of old iron. Wheels were everywhere, intermixed with boots and shoes, books, papers and tools. A well-bred pig would not have been pleased with such untidy quarters. And who was to blame for it but the woman who permitted such a den to exist unmolested in her house? Lele blamed Jennie, very naturally, and resolved to give her an object lesson in "redding up" that would open her eyes.

It did Lele good to clean up that room. How she worked! After the windows were thrown open to admit the pure air, and the bed made to look a little less repulsive, she concluded to hang up the scattered clothing and arrange things in some sort of order. And when the floor had been swept and the dust removed, the place looked, if not attractive, at least a little more like a human habitation. Lele next turned her attention to the various works of art which decorated the walls — pictures of ballet girls, actresses, and various gaudy advertising cards, some of which were hardly fit for the public gaze, and all in questionable taste. The worst ones she took down; from the others

she turned with disgust. Next she examined the piles of reading matter that had accumulated in dusty heaps about the room — stacks of *Police Gazettes, Saturday Nights,* and other papers of a sensational type. All sorts of pamphlets advertising machinery, works on telegraphy, phrenology, mechanics, etc. And scattered everywhere were flashy, yellow-backed novels, with illustrations hardly suited to a lady's eye. Among the whole collection she found but two standard works, a ragged and soiled *St. Elmo* and an *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* yellow with time, tattered, thumb-marked and dog-eared. Both of these she had read, and she had now no desire to re-peruse them. The exhibition of Ed's literary taste appalled her. Did her father know what Ed was reading? When she left the room her hopes of reclaiming him were low indeed.

In the upper hall she found Jennie just leaving Syd's room with a broom and dust-pan in her hand. She motioned to Lele to look within. And again there was something dramatic in her gesture, something that said as plain as words, "Look on that picture, and now on this!"

Lele glanced in, expecting a great difference in the furnishing, but saw little. The floor was also bare, the walls whitewashed, and only cheap shades at the curtainless windows; but everything was in the most exquisite order.

A lady's bedroom could not have been more neat and pure. Everything was in its place; no dust anywhere; no scattered papers; no questionable illustra-

tions. The bed-covers were whole, the pillows snowy, and the painted floor shone with wax. In Ed's room were pipes and cigar stumps and decks of greasy cards; none here. In contrast to Ed's reading matter stood a neat bookcase, filled with well-worn books on a wide range of subjects, but all by standard authors. In the lower shelves were files of papers,— chiefly political, farm and home,— each in its labeled pigeon hole. And above the mantel hung the only picture in the room, the portrait of a beautiful woman. It was a fascinating face; one never tired of looking at it. Its beauty was striking, but the chief charm lay in the expression of the eyes, and of the firm, yet gentle mouth, appealing to the finer traits of one's character, and thus wielding an influence for good, as a rose jar sends out perfume long after the sweet petals are faded.

"What a lovely face!" exclaimed Lele. "It does me good only to look at it."

"Mamma's picture," explained Jennie, looking away. "Syd likes to have it where he can see it the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning. He says it makes a better man of him. And I believe it does. Syd favors mamma, I think."

A tear for the gentle mother she missed so sorely momentarily dimmed the brightness of her hard black eyes.

"He does, in expression," assented Lele, sympathetically. "How nice you keep his room, Jennie."

"I spend but little more time on it than I do on Ed's. Syd keeps things in order himself mostly, and

Ed swears so dreadfully when I clean up his room and misplace anything that I've given up trying to do much there."

"The pictures have their influence, too," mused Lele.

"Yes; but you couldn't get Ed to keep any better ones. His tastes are — disgusting!"

"Ed says he's slept under nothin' but strings ever since he can remember, an' he knows that ole bedstead came over in the Mayflower," piped up Tude, from the head of the stairs.

Jennie made no reply, but gave the child a glance that would have sent her flying downstairs did looks possess projectile force.

Later in the morning Cora and Tude made some half-way friendly overtures to Lele by showing her their quilt pieces, but the day dragged wearily enough. No one had much to say at dinner. Even Syd was taciturn, and Lele imagined from the scowl on Ed's brow that the two boys had been quarreling again. The afternoon was duller than ever. Lele could have enjoyed an afternoon nap if screens had banished the flies. As it was, she was obliged to take a book and sit on the lawn in the shade in order to keep awake. The view was better worth looking at than her book.

The lawn, gently sloping from the house to the public road, was quite different in scope and appearance from the ordinary farm dooryard, and consequently the envy of the whole country-side. With its sweep of velvet turf, its clumps of shrubbery, its bor-

dered walks and rustic seats, its roses, lilies and honeysuckles, and stately trees, that seemed to have been growing since the days of William Penn, it looked little enough like the abode of poverty and discord. Rather like the country home of some wealthy family, who chose to spend their summers "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife," contented, happy and luxurious. It was in the interior of the house, where everything was worn and shabby, and in the farm fences and outbuildings, that the tokens of poverty were most apparent.

Back of the house lay the garden; to the west was a grassy hillside, on top of which was the family burial ground, where the ancestral monuments stood out in bold relief against the sky.

CHAPTER VII.

How the Day Ended..

That interminable "first day"! Would it indeed last always? Lele seemed to live fully three years between the matins and the vespers of her devout colony of blackbirds. Now they were silent as the winking stars in the firmament, and the red light had faded from the west. It was dusk, and the four girls sat rocking on the veranda. Across the clover fields, where the fireflies hung like sparks of light, they could hear the monotonous "Yip, yip, yip!" of Ol Stuart's captive dog and the jingling notes of a piano mixed in a melancholy discord. Lele kept repeating to herself as she rocked: "Eight more sunsets. Eight more evenings dedicated to barking dogs and other melancholy sounds, that would have enhanced Milton's fame had he put them into *Il Penseroso.*"

Ed was gone for Lele's trunks, which somehow added to her load of depression. When he proposed going for them, she felt that she would cheerfully have given all her income for the next two years for a respectable excuse to depart.

Her day, notwithstanding her high hopes of rendering herself useful in the old home, had registered itself on the failure side of the column. Her two

hours spent in Ed's room had reaped a rich harvest of oaths from that youth, who had nearly knocked Jennie down for "tearing up Jack" in his room, and appeared but little mollified by hearing that it was Lele who had banished some of his most scantily attired ballet girls and wrought other irrevocable havoc in his sanctuary.

"D— her, if she can't do anything but 'tear up Jack' in my room, she'd better clear out!" she heard him say, as he sprang into the wagon and drove down the lane at breakneck speed. Lele was thankful after all that she was not going. Her bones would have been proof against no such knocks as they would have received from the road wagon in the hands of this ill-tempered Jehu. She began now to believe that Sally Cahill had not misrepresented Ed much; he was certainly the farthest remove from "angelic" of any person she had ever met.

Mr. Fairfax had not yet returned, and the other boys were feeding the stock, after a long, hard day's work in the harvest field.

On the veranda there was no attempt at conversation. Cora and Tude waited for the older girls to begin, but Lele was far too blue to open a cheerful conversation, and Jennie was sullenly silent.

To do the girl justice, she wished to do right, but her nature seemed disproportionate to her surroundings. She was like a young leopardess growing up in a walled garden, whose carefully planted flower-beds she was ruining by futile attempts to escape to her native

wilds. Ambitious and talented, with no way to gratify her ambition or develop her talents, she was living a life of repression, that was crushing out all her nobler qualities. She did not know, herself, what she was fitted for, though music was her ruling passion. To be a great singer — ah! that would be *life!* Jean felt that she had never yet lived. And until she could live she felt that she dared not die. Into Eternity she would carry with her this mad longing, this craving for vigorous action. Oh, for emancipation from the petty tyranny of the Commonplace!

Without a better education than she possessed she felt that she never could accomplish anything. Why must Lele have the education and Jean the ability to use it to advantage?

It is a common belief that if one can not be useful in a narrow sphere, one need not expect to be useful in a wider one. But is it not also true that some natures need expansion to fit them for real usefulness, and are dwarfed and distorted by close and long-continued processes of repression? Jen's was.

None knew just what ailed her. She had been a bright and happy child a few years ago. At nineteen she was a soured, disappointed, hopeless woman. All the sweetness of a naturally generous and noble nature seemed to be turning to vinegar.

To-night she sat in a wild waste of thoughts that surged through her mind so fiercely she almost feared they were audible to others. Again and again the tide of words flowed eloquently to her lips; but she reso-

lutely forced it back, fearing that her own aspirations would be betrayed to one who had no interest whatever in her or her plans. Mere empty gossip had no place in Jennie's thoughts. She must talk from the heart, if at all.

Lele, meanwhile, felt sad and lonely. She would indeed have been glad of a friendly shoulder to lean against and weep. This place, so melancholy, these silent sisters, the twilight and honeysuckles and far-off noises of the night, made her heart ache. If they would only *talk* to her! But even little Tude was mute to-night.

The boys came trooping through the hall at last and sat down, Charlie, as usual, assuming a recumbent position on the floor, with his heels dangling over the edge of the veranda. "Charlie will never injure his spine by sitting or standing," his father sometimes said, sarcastically.

"Why don't you have a light?" asked Syd, by way of saying something. Jean replied by lighting the hall lamp. No one spoke. A sheep-bell tinkled in some distant pasture, and a piano sounded in a monotonous jumble of high notes across the fields — Maud's piano.

"I'd rather hear the cackling of a guinea than that old thing," complained Charlie, covering up his ears with his arms. "When *I* get married, I won't have a piano on the premises. I notice the practicing at St. John's is done at the busiest hours. I can always tell when dinner or supper is a-nearin'. There's a loud clash of music that lasts until the bell rings; and after

the meal is over, I notice it begins again like a tornado, and lasts until Mrs. St. John hangs up the dishpan by the kitchen door."

Syd was silent. Visions of long summer mornings in the past, when he was working on the far side of the place in sight of St. John's, came to tantalize him. Maud, in her intervals of practicing, used to sit on the vine-covered veranda and crochet. How beautiful she had looked in her white dress and blue ribbons, bending her blonde head over her dainty work, while her mother, with a tired look on her worn face, was toiling at the wash-tub or over the hot kitchen stove! He did not think of it then, but many a time since it had occurred to him that white hands may but be symbols of selfishness, and music but one way of idling time.

A wagon was at length heard approaching. Syd listened intently.

"Our wagon," he announced, in a tone of relief. "I suppose Ed has waited for father."

The wagon stopped at the outer gate.

"Yes, that's Ed," Syd reiterated. "Father is with him, of course."

The children began to talk among themselves, but Jean walked impatiently to the end of the veranda and strained her ear to hear the opening of the gate.

Syd sprang down off the veranda, and saying something in an undertone to his sister as he passed, hurried down the lane. They could hear every footstep, each one swifter than the last.

"Better come into the house," said Jennie, going in. "It's getting damp out there."

The two boys whispered to each other and scrambled to their feet, while Cora shook Tude awake and half dragged, half carried her into the house.

As Lele was following them in, wondering as to the cause of the commotion, she heard Cora say to her elder sister:

"It's just *like* him; I'd be ashamed!"

"I'm not sure," said Jennie, in agitated reply, "whether Ed is *in* the wagon. He may have fallen out and been run over."

Lele waited to ask no questions. Like a flash she sped through the veranda, down the steps and out into the lane, up which the wagon by this time was approaching. She retreated inside the little gate and waited.

"What *is* the matter?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Oh, *nothing.*" Syd's tone was impatient. "Ed has gone to sleep and father has not come home. Go back to the house, please, and tell Jen to bring out the lantern, so we can put up the horses. And, Lele, *don't come back here.* We'll attend to your trunks."

"I was not thinking of my trunks, sir," replied the girl, haughtily. And she turned to deliver his message, but, meeting Jennie and the others, retraced her steps.

"Jen, hold the lantern here," said Syd, in an agitated voice, as she came up. "I don't know but the

trunks may have crushed his skull. No, I guess he's all right. Don't let Lele come out again. Oh, there she is!"

"At least tell me what has happened," implored Lele.

Syd sprang down from the wagon, and going up to her, took her trembling hands in his with a quick impulse of sympathy, though his cheek burned with shame.

"Lele, I hate to tell you, and tried to get you back to the house so you wouldn't know. Ed has come home — *dead drunk!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

Sunday Morning.

Lele's sleep that night was miserable indeed. Often she would start up nervously, half fancying she heard some sound of a supernatural character. Sometimes she thought she heard mysterious rappings; once a switch seemed to tap the window sharply; gusty sighs appeared to emanate from the closet; imaginary sounds all — so acute is the sense of hearing at the still midnight hour, and so powerfully are ordinary sounds magnified by excited nerves.

With it all she was vaguely uneasy about her father. What if somebody had murdered him days ago? What if he had disappeared never to be heard of more? And poor, misguided Ed! Ah, me!

Toward morning she was roused by the loud neighing and tramping of horses, apparently just beneath her window. Running to see what was the matter, she was just in time to observe in the bright starlight three or four horses galloping past the corner of the house. One of them slipped on the pavement and fell, and the second quite turned a summersault over the fallen steed, which gave vent to a shriek that curdled her blood. She drew back shaking with fear, for she thought both were at least fatally crippled; but the

next moment they were on their feet and had gone with a mad rush to the farther end of the lawn, where they stood for a minute or two squealing and kicking at each other, and then came back at a gallop straight for the parlor window. They paused, however, before colliding with the sash, and began kicking at each other in such good earnest that every blow sounded as if a bone had splintered. The whole house was roused. Jen's voice was heard frantically calling for Syd to "hurry up—the horses were killing each other," and in a very short time, Syd, with a lantern, appeared on the scene. Whereupon the mischievous imps made a charge at the fence, through which they crashed like cannon balls, and then went careering in high spirits down the lane. It took Syd quite a while to capture and stable them. Nor was this accomplished without considerable risk, for among the animals was a very ill-tempered mule belonging to one of the neighbors —a creature noted for its kicking and biting propensities. And the horses themselves were in no amiable mood. Lele experienced a good deal of relief when she at last saw Syd come back unharmed, swinging the lantern in his hand. It would not have surprised her much if he had been killed. "Not that I would have broken my heart over him," she reflected, "but if Syd must be killed by these dreadful creatures I should rather it occur after I go back to St. Louis."

She fell off dozing, and in her dreams saw him mangled in a chariot race, where the steeds were stump-tailed bay mules.

"I wonder if these scenes occur often!" she said to herself on waking. "One vow I now register — never to marry a farmer until electricity entirely supersedes horses."

She fell off dozing again, and was roused by the terrified bellowing of cattle — one of them having become fast in some way out in the barnyard, which opportunity another seemed to have taken to gore it to death.

Syd and the lantern again flashed, meteor-like, across the lawn. Shortly afterward Lele registered another vow, viz:

"Never to marry a farmer *at all.* City people have but little to dread but fire and robbers, and those seldom materialize. But this stock-raising I could not endure."

About daybreak she fell into a heavy sleep, from which she was roused by Cora, two hours later.

"Pap's got home," Cora said, through the keyhole. "You'd better hurry down, for he wants to see you, an' he'll be awful mad if we keep breakfast back till his coffee gets cold."

"What good will my life resolution, 'Never meet trouble half way,' do me if I allow myself to worry about trifles as I have since I've been here?" she thought. "It isn't *like* me, and now that I understand better how things are here I ought not to feel so sensitive about apparent slights. These poor creatures have enough to bear, what with their kicking horses,

bawling cows and"— she heaved a sigh —"such a brother as poor, pitiable Ed."

She was a little excited, though — somewhat pale and shaken — when she found herself in her father's presence, after so many years.

Mr. Fairfax was habitually well dressed; a fine-looking man, above the medium height, but inclined to stoutness. His dark brown hair was silvered at the temples, and his flowing beard tinged with gray; but the blue eyes behind their gold-rimmed eye-glasses were as keen and bright as a boy's. His face had the attractiveness always accompanying regular features and intelligence.

A gentleman in the accepted sense he was—immaculate as to linen, spotless as to broadcloth, courtly in manner.

He was seated at the foot of the table absorbed in a newspaper when she came in. Syd touched him on the shoulder as he nodded "Good-morning" to Lele.

"Here's Lele, father," he said, adding to her: "You'll have to speak a little loud to him; he's slightly hard of hearing."

Mr. Fairfax at this deliberately folded his newspaper, laid it beside his plate, and removing his gold eye-glasses, held out his hand to Lele.

"And this is my eldest daughter grown into womanhood," he said. "Do you remember your mother? I can see you resemble her."

"Very little," said Lele, in answer to his question.

"Sometimes I fancy I can remember things that occurred before her death; but that must be a mistake. I was but two years old when she died."

"Yes, I know. You can have no recollection of her. It is a pity your aunt kept you away from us so much; you and Ed should not have been separated." He frowned as he glanced at his son's empty place. "When did you arrive?" he next asked.

"Friday evening. I sent you a telegram"—

"Yes, I know," which seemed to be a favorite phrase with him—one warranted to cut short any other person's loquacity and give him, what he dearly loved, full sway with his tongue. "But I was obliged to leave on Wednesday, and found business so pressing that I could not return until late last night. I knew the folks had nothing in particular to keep them from entertaining you — only a little harvesting on hands; we don't farm very extensively — not as we did in my father's time."

Syd shot an odd glance at Jennie, and bent over his plate looking flushed and indignant. Mr. Fairfax made no further inquiries about Lele's journey — did not ask about her graduation, (strangely enough none of them had mentioned it!) but began at once to discourse learnedly upon a liquor law which had been passed contrary to his vote, and for some reason was doing more harm than good. Lele listened respectfully, throwing in an occasional leading question, and the rest sat in silence, apparently taking but little

interest in the subject. Occasionally Jennie's dark eyes would flash and kindle and her lips would quiver with some repressed speech; but she said nothing.

"Now with regard to selling liquor to minors," said Mr. Fairfax, addressing Lele as though she were a lawyer of mature age, and ignoring the others, "there ought to be a law prohibiting any minor from entering a saloon. Keep a man out of saloons until he is twenty-one, and ten chances to one he'll never be a drinking man. It is drinking whisky when he is young and soft, and ready to believe that any low act is a manly act, that spoils him for life."

"Yes; but how would you keep him out?"

"Make laws to do it! Every minor seen in a saloon should be tied to a whipping-post and given twenty lashes for the first offense, and thirty for the second. Take my word for it these whippings would cure any boy of a taste for saloons."

Lele thought differently, but did not say so. After breakfast, her father told her to look around and amuse herself; he had some accounts to look over and wouldn't have much time to talk to her before dinner; but he hoped she would make herself "perfectly at home." And Lele, feeling like "small potatoes in Ireland," even in the eyes of her own father, went up-stairs to while away the time by shaking out her dresses.

"I'd better have left them at the station," she thought.

Her trunks were well filled — one of them with articles of clothing which she had outgrown. These

were things she had intended to give the younger girls, together with a number of little gifts, newly purchased.

Lele examined them carefully, doubting whether any of them would make acceptable gifts. There was a mustache cup for her father; would he appreciate it? And those embroidered cigar cases for Ed and Syd — how trivial and useless they looked! Would Jennie care for a volume of poems, or Cora for an album, or Clem for a tool-chest, or Charlie for a story book? Very likely not. She could not get near enough to any of them this morning to exchange remarks. Ed, of course, was invisible, and Syd might as well have been. The only consolation was that that young gentleman had obviously given up all designs on her hand. Lele wondered at herself for feeling vaguely disappointed.

She took a big doll out of the trunk and began arranging its toilet with the air of one who seeks that companionship from inanimate objects which is denied by flesh and blood.

> "When dreamless sleep is mine I shall not need
> The tenderness for which I long to-day,"

She mused. "Oh, dear! how dull I am. I wonder if I shall have to resort to dolls for amusement — perhaps grow imbecile and take up with all sorts of childish amusements."

Presently she heard a gasp of delight. Tude, peering through the half-open door, had caught sight of the doll.

"Come here, Tude," she called.

The child dropped down on her knees before the trunk in silent adoration.

"Do you happen," asked Lele, "to know any good little girl who needs a new doll?"

Tude hung her head, but peeped up at her shyly through her curls.

"You didn't think about me when you bought it, did you?" she asked.

Lele smiled and laid the doll in Tude's outstretched arms. As she did so, its blue eyes closed. Tude screamed with delight, then paused doubtfully.

"She ain't bewitched, is she?" she asked solemnly.

"No, no. Why do you think so?"

"I thought maybe the ghost had come in an' conjured her. Sister says a ghost walks through this room every night."

"Ah!"

"An' she says she bets you won't stay long after you see it!"

"Hasn't she any other room for me to sleep in?"

"Oh, yes. You might sleep with her. But"— then breaking off with an apologetic little smile, "Jen's cross!"

"Is that the only reason she makes me sleep in the front room alone?"

"I guess so. She said if you had to sleep in the ghost room you wouldn't stay so long. The creaks, they come; the raps, *they* come; an' sometimes the taps

come, an' they're worst of all." Tude glanced fearfully about her and edged toward the door with her doll.

"What do you mean by the creaks and the raps and the taps?" demanded Lele.

"I hardly know. Only if you hear 'em you'll never want to hear 'em again,— never in your world," she added in a "little Prudy" fashion peculiar to the child. "Them creaks an' things bring bad luck, let me tell you. Jen says she thinks sometimes there's an evil spirit in the curtains. She wishes she could burn up ever' rag an' totter of 'em an' then maybe we'd have luck. Oh, dolly, you are *so* pretty!"

"She's yours, dear," said Lele. "Won't you kiss me, too?" as the child kissed the doll.

But Tude would not.

"I promised Jen I wouldn't," she whispered, glancing fearfully at the door. "She said she'd *lam* me well if I kissed you, or made up with you one bit!"

Lele was flesh and blood. At last an angry flush rose to her cheek and her eyes flashed.

"Go and tell Cora and Clem and Charlie I have something for them in my trunk," she said, hastily rising. "Tell them I want to see them *right away.*"

Tude flew down-stairs like the wind, carrying her treasure with her.

"Look what I've got! Look what I've got!' she screamed, rushing gleefully into the kitchen. "Lele says she is going to give something nice to Cora an'

Clem an' Charlie if they'll come right straight up-stairs; but she won't give nothin' to Jen, 'cause she made her sleep in the ghost room."

Now it chanced that this little speech came up at the worst possible time with regard to any peace between the two step-sisters. Jennie, ashamed of her conduct already, had been trying to make up her mind to show Lele more courtesy, when Tude's speech threw all "the fat in the fire" again, and Jennie, more angry than ever, gave herself bodily over to her evil genius. She said nothing at first, only redoubling her efforts to sweep the kitchen clean —"diggin' splinters off the floor at every jab," Charlie declared. All the dust in the floor was soon in the air.

"I've seen dusts," gasped Charlie, "but I'll swan I never *set peepers,* as Sam Cahill says, on such a dust Sunday morning. You can't see your hand before you. If any of the neighbors would happen in it would play hobs with Spix's Markley chances. His first wife was so clean that she scraped the cracks of her kitchen floor with a toothpick; an' kep' a scrapin', I guess, till she gradually scraped herself out of the world."

"It tickles Jin to fill our hair full of dust, so she can scold us for letting our scalps get dirty," said Clem, plaintively.

"Clear out of the dust then,' said Jennie, positively. "You have all out-doors to stand in, I reckon, without clutterin' up the kitchen till I can't sweep."

After the dust subsided Tude inquired why they didn't all go upstairs after their presents.

"I wonder, now, if she'd give me a knife with two blades. I want one awful bad," said Clem, looking inquiringly at Charlie, who looked back at him and said, as he slid gradually off the kitchen table:

"I reckon she don't know I want a Robinson Crusoe."

"And I," sighed Cora, "am just crazy for a new dress."

"Well, you'll take none from *her,*" snapped Jennie, flinging the broom back of the door.

"Now, Caudle, you're just mad 'cause she won't give you nothin'," said Charlie; "I'm goin' right straight upstairs, an' if she's anything to offer, I'll pocket it. Come on, Clem."

They started for a race.

"No, boys!" Jennie's voice rang out somewhat like Sheridan's when he shouted: "Turn, boys, turn; we're going back." The boys turned.

"It isn't because she's trying to slight me," Jennie went on. "I wouldn't *have* her old trumpery, and she knows it. No doubt she's got a trunk half full of old cast-off duds and second-hand Christmas gifts that she thinks she'll dispose of by pokin' them off onto us. I'd sooner throw them into her face than take them, and so would the rest of you if you had any spunk."

"Spunk's the *main* thing!" groaned Charlie. "Oh, ye gooseberries! How I wish we all had enough of it."

"I don't see what harm it would be to take what she offers us," pleaded Cora. "We're never able to

buy anything, and I don't see why we should always be too spunky to take what is offered to us."

"No, you don't," said Jennie, pushing the table back against the wall with a series of deafening squeaks. "You haven't a bit more spirit than a June chicken. You'd stand there half asleep and hold out your apron for a present if one of the *St. Johns* offered it. You really would."

"Oh, Jen! You know I wouldn't."

"Yes, you would. You'd wear old cast-off shoes and gloves that Trix Collins offered you!"

"Wait and see, madam!" said Cora, beginning to get "roused.'

"I've got the pride of my race in my veins, and you ought to have the pride of yours. The Fairfaxes were always above letting anybody patronize them; but your ancestors might as well have been Cahills or Grimses for all the good an old name does you."

"Well, now, Jen, what's the use to scold so?" pleaded Cora. "Pride won't put shoes on your feet nor dresses on your back. You know I haven't a dress to my name that is really fit to wear, an' my best shoes are more 'holey' than righteous."

"What of that? Have *I* anything to wear?"

"You had a new hat last summer, while *I* haven't had one for *three* years."

"I'd rob a milliner's store, Code, I would indeed, 'fore I'd go into winter quarters in that hat of yours," said Charlie. "It looked like a hornet's nest when it

was new, and now it looks like the home of a field mouse."

"'Taint so!" said Cora, indignantly.

"A stuffed bat and one or two dried grasshoppers might chirk it up a bit!" said Charlie. "But I think it would hardly pass at that."

"You've your black alpaca," said Cora, ignoring Charlie's last taunt, though smarting under it.

"My black alpaca!" echoed Jennie with an indescribable accent. "It was clear out of date last winter; it's impossible now. And besides it has faded out as green as grass. I always feel like I want to crawl into a knot-hole when I get into company in that rig — I can hardly bear to look up.'

"A regular back number," said Charlie. "But I like you best in it, Jen, *because you can never find your tongue when you wear it.*'

"You looked so *stylish* in it at first."

"I thought I did because I didn't know any better."

"You mean people hadn't got to puttin' on so much *dog* at Bethany," said Charlie.

"That's it. Nobody wears alpaca now. I never dare stand near any of the girls in their new cashmeres and henriettas. It makes me feel like an old umbrella that has bleached out green in the rain and sun."

"But still has its *snap*," whispered Charlie.

Tude now quite innocently "put the cap on the climax."

"You just ought to have seen Lele's black silk!"

she panted, as though overpowered by a sudden recollection of its richness. "I heard such a rustlin' that I thought she was makin' up the straw tick, an' so I peeped in to see what she was at, an' saw her shakin' out her silk. It was fixed up fine enough for anybody's second-day dress — all a-glitterin' with jet"—

"Wouldn't your ole *alapacker* cut a figure along side it at Bethany Church?" said Charlie, glancing at Jennie and feeling half sorry for her, boy as he was, she looked so miserable.

"Why, I wouldn't go into Bethany Church with her for anything on earth," Jennie exclaimed, beneath whose dark eyes unshed tears were casting shadows. "If she stays here a month of Sundays *I'll* never go to meeting with her. I'll let her know she's in the wrong pew when she comes here to spread around in her fine silks."

"It does look mean when she knows *we've* nothing to dress on," sighed Cora.

"An' that wasn't the *only* one, either," added Tude, glorifying in her rôle of reporter. "She's got a brown silk finer than Mary St. John's weddin' dress. It's just that fine it hurts your eyes to look at it!"

"And she knows we're up to the eyes in debt," cried Jennie. "She can't help knowing how much bad luck we've had and how little we've got to live on. Yet she's never once sent us so much as a hair ribbon all these years. She's a chip off the old block, *she* is."

"In other words, a female Ome," observed the undutiful Charlie.

"I'll bet her presents won't amount to a hill of beans, anyhow," Jennie went on. "There'll be some toy books for each of you boys, an' an old sunshade for Code. Like as not she's got a pair of soiled gloves for me, and a necktie apiece for Ed and Syd. You'll not catch *her* givin' away anything of value. She's been too well trained for *that*. They say her aunt and uncle were two of the stingiest old coots in all this part of the country."

"Besides their inherited *screwism*," Charlie added.

"Tude's doll must have cost something," suggested Cora.

"It's an old one of Lele's dressed up, I'll warrant."

"Well, I don't believe I want any of her presents," said Clem slowly.

"Jen won't let us go upstairs —'fear we'll get something nice an' she won't," said Charlie. "Better let us go, 'Sphixia; maybe she'll relent an' send you somethin', after all."

Charlie had several pet names for Jennie, such as Miss Asphyxia, Xantippe, Mrs. Poyser, Caudle, etc. When he wanted to twit her on her age he called her "ole nineteener."

"Oh, go, go by all means," sneered Jennie; "but if she gives you some old nursery rhymes, or a cotton handkerchief, or a stick of hoarhound candy, it will be just good *for* you. If you haven't pride enough to show yourself independent of her charity you *deserve* to get bit."

"I guess I'll not bother goin' up," said Cora, slowly.

"Well, if nobody else will go I won't!" said Charlie, walking so heavily out of the room that he shook some of the pans off the shelf in his anger.

CHAPTER IX.

Lele and Jennie.

After waiting for some time for the children to come and get their presents Lele became convinced that Tude had either forgotten to deliver her message, or that Jennie had interfered; so she decided to take the presents downstairs herself.

Upon thinking the matter over, she concluded that it would be best to give them to Jennie for distribution. Lele's anger, always short-lived, had already abated, and she determined at all hazards to establish friendly relations with the unhappy girl. It was inexpressibly sad to see one so young steeped, as it were, to the very lips in gall. This state of mind must have resulted from a combination of unfortunate circumstances whose nature Lele only partly comprehended. Accordingly, "with malice toward none, with charity for all," she bravely took up her armful of presents and went down, bent on "beardling the Douglas in her hall." But when, upon reaching the foot of the stairs, Jennie emerged from the parlor with a broom and dustpan in her hands, Lele's courage began to ebb. For the fiftieth time she wished herself, trunks and presents back at the station with the west-bound express just due. There was that in Jen's glance, her expression,

her whole attitude that would have intimidated even a war correspondent. Lele's feet seemed at that moment to be fuller of thoughts than her head; it was with the greatest difficulty that she could keep them from carrying her back to her room with all haste.

"I have some little presents for the children that I should like for you to distribute. Will you, Jennie?" she was greatly relieved to hear herself say when at last she recovered her *presence* of mind. "Here is a volume of poems for you, and the others are each marked with the owner's name."

Half a dozen little gifts are sure to look rather liberal in the eyes of a good-natured, sweet-tempered giver accustomed to look upon such things as merely a proof of good-will, ornamental perhaps, but not necessarily useful. In the eyes of the recipients they may appear positively niggardly. Jen, moreover, was just now in a mood to spurn any friendly offering made by the owner of those rustling silks. She stood silent, her eyes growing visibly larger, darker, more unsmiling than usual, the strong, white teeth sinking with a spasmodic movement into the full, tremulous underlip.

"I hope you like Longfellow, Jennie," Lele went on, seeing that the other made no attempt to take the book she held out. "If not, I can easily exchange it for some favorite of yours."

"Don't trouble yourself," said stony-hearted Jennie; "*I* never read poetry, or anything else. I've no time. You better give it to somebody who has."

"I'm sorry I didn't know that," said Lele, pleas-

antly. "What would you prefer instead of a book?"

"I really don't care anything about presents, and I don't think any of the rest do, either. When people can give nothing they should accept nothing."

"But, Jennie, I wish to give each of you something as a token of friendship. None of the gifts are valuable. You need have no scruples about accepting them. All I ask in return is as much friendship as prompts their offering."

"I see they are not particularly valuable," said Jennie, cruelly. "We are in need of a good many things here, but not any of what you have to offer. And as for friendship — it can not be so easily purchased."

Lele looked bewildered.

"What have I done to make you hate me so?" she cried.

"Who said I hated you?"

"Nothing but hate could make you treat me in this way, Jennie."

The two girls stood a few steps apart, gazing steadily into each other's eyes. There was bitter defiance in Jennie's, but neither anger nor contempt in the clear brown eyes of her fair young step-sister. Only pity and wonder were mirrored there.

After vainly trying to outlook one whom she persisted in considering an avowed enemy, the angry girl said:

"I know we're bad, but I don't think *you* can civilize us."

"I don't know what you mean, Jennie."

"I suppose you've read in some Sunday-school story about a girl that goes home after an absence of several years and civilizes her father's family. It's an old tale. Quite different in real life, though, from what it is in books."

"In what does it differ, Jennie?"

"In books the heroine harnesses the whole family, and drives them how and where she will. Everything pans out exactly right. Drunkards are reformed; everybody gets religion — politicians even! Poverty and strife vanish; an obliging uncle in India dies just at the right moment and leaves his fortune to the heroine; she marries and is rich and happy ever after. Pah! I hate such lying tales."

"I thought you had no time for reading!" said Lele.

"I haven't for that kind of stuff. I got a distaste for it when I was a child. And I don't have time for anything better. When I have nothing else to do I — patch."

"And dream, I suppose," said Lele, thoughtfully.

"I've got something else to do but sit in a hammock and imagine things, as you town girls do," said Jennie.

Lele looked steadily at her rebellious hostess.

"Jennie," she said, pleadingly, "why do you treat me so strangely? Am I your enemy?"

"You have never been my friend!" said Jennie, coldly, "and as you have always had everything else

you wanted all your life you can do without any friendship of mine. You don't need it."

"What have I that you have not?" asked Lele.

"A college education."

"Have you been jealous of my educational advantages all these years? I never suspected it."

"It's true — I wanted an education," said Jennie, sullenly.

"Don't blame me, Jennie. I was powerless to aid you. My aunt and uncle cherished singular prejudices against my father's family. Had they lived I never could have come here at all. But as soon as I was at liberty to do as I pleased in the matter I chose to come here, that I might know you all. I felt so anxious to meet you," the sweet voice faltered. "I took the first opportunity to bridge the gulf that had always been between us. I am so alone in the world, Jennie. I do so *long* for brothers and sisters to love me."

"You've ignored us all these years."

"Auntie wouldn't allow me to hold any communication with my father's family, except to write to papa once or twice a year. I never thought it right; but as I did not know that you really needed any help that I could give, it seemed less wrong and unnatural to me than it must have seemed to you. Will you not let the past be forgotten and let us be friends for the future?"

"I can't tell you what I've suffered the last few years," said Jennie, slowly; "I've got so I hate everybody almost — you among the rest. I've said often

that if you ever came here to visit I'd drive you away. You've had a good time all your life, but you can't fare any better than the rest of us here."

"Am I to blame," asked Lele, "for my aunt's wishes while she lived, or for her will when she died?"

"I suppose not.'

"And why blame me because I did not visit you or try to help you sooner? I came at the earliest possible moment. How was I received?"

"With shameful lack of courtesy, I'll admit," said Jennie, with blazing cheeks. "I'm sorry."

"Then why do you still hold me at a distance? Oh, Jennie, Jennie, why will you not let me love you and help you?"

But for Jennie's evil genius she would have thrown her arms around the lovely, beseeching girl and all would have been forever right between them. But Jennie's prejudice had been growing too long to be easily uprooted. She shook off the hand that would have rested caressingly on her shoulder. It was just the loving touch she so much needed, but the hand was white as a lily, soft as satin and adorned with a costly ring. Jennie clenched her own toil-worn, sunburned hands and looked sullenly away. A beautiful white hand was one source of ungratified longing with her, and among all other gifts Lele must needs possess this one, too.

"Jennie," said Lele, in a very winning tone, "I should like to have you know me as I am, and not as you imagine me."

Jennie was silent. It nearly killed her to contemplate the prospect of an extended visit from Lele. Shame and regret only added piquancy to her dislike for her fortunate step-sister.

"I really can not stay if you don't want me," said Lele, ready to burst into tears.

"You needn't mind me," Jennie contrived to utter. "You came to see your father and Ed, I suppose. I haven't any right to drive you away from them."

"I can not stay as their guest if you do not want me."

"I am awfully sorry I've treated you so," said Jennie, deeply humiliated. "I wouldn't, only I'm so miserable, and I've misunderstood you so," she added humbly.

"Then you will not refuse my little gift?"

"I — I — don't — deserve it," stammered the wretched girl, and she burst into tears. Lele, touched with pity, led her gently into the parlor and closed the door. Words spoken now to that rebellious heart would have been worse than wasted. Lele, quite unconsciously, did the wisest thing she could have done — cried as hard as Jennie did. Tears were as much a relief to one as to the other. But little was said afterwards.

An hour later, Jennie having gone up to her room to meditate on her misdeeds and consider Lele's friendly overtures before deciding to capitulate, Lele went out to the swing in the back yard (where the children were congregated) to distribute their presents, feeling very

much like a doctor vaccinating a group of unwilling school children, gratis. Acting upon Jennie's instructions, they seemed uncertain what to do, and would gladly have declined the little gifts she offered rather than face Jen and her succeeding curtain lecture.

At last, feeling that she had missed it all around in the gift-making line, Lele inquired if any of them were going to church at Bethany.

"I guess not," said Cora. "The preacher preaches forever, an' drolls it out so it makes your head buzz to hear him."

"When do they have Sunday-school?"

"At two in the afternoon; preachin' 's at three. You ought to hear the flies buzz there these hot afternoons!"

"Don't any of you go?"

"Hardly ever. Jin and Syd both got mad 'cause they treated 'em so mean 'bout the singin'. I don't like to go to Bethany; they dress up so!"

"How far is it?"

"A mile an' a half or so. We used to ride, but now pap's sold the buggy an' spring wagon we have t' walk. It's no snap this weather I c'n tell you. You goin'?"

"I will if I can get anybody to show me the way. Will you, Cora?"

"Oh — I — can't," said Cora, slowly. She was thinking of her shabby clothes. Lele put the same question to the boys.

Charlie and Clem, rather ashamed of their grace-

less manner heretofore, would have consented gladly if they had, either of them, possessed a whole suit that was fit to wear to Bethany.

But the fact was that they hardly ever were lucky enough to get spring suits until about the Fourth of July, and that kept them mostly at home all spring. On this score they felt compelled to decline the honor of escorting their new sister to church.

"She'd be ashamed of us," thought Charlie. "An' besides I don't propose to risk bein' guyed again soon by the Bethany boys as I was last time I was there in that ole skimpy, hedgehog suit of mine."

Tude, when appealed to, gave ready consent, being as yet indifferent to the cut of her clothes.

Unpleasant as these scenes had been, one yet more distressing lay before Lele. She felt that she must see Ed, who had never been entirely absent from her waking thoughts since the previous evening. Through Tude she procured a cup of tea, and the two went up and knocked at Ed's door.

"Who's there?' demanded a surly voice very much like that in which Sir Wolf addressed Little Red Riding Hood.

"It's Lele, Ed," said his sister's soft voice. "May I come in? I've got a cup of tea for you."

Ed growled out something equivalent to "Lift the latch," and the two girls entered, little Tude sniffing contemptuously as the scent of liquor saluted her little nose.

Ed, deathly sick, and nearly crazed with headache,

lay with one arm doubled up under his head, the other hand grasping a newspaper with which he was fighting the flies. Though both door and window were now open, the combined odor of whisky and tobacco nearly made Lele sick, while the purple face with bloodshot eyes peering over the old ragged quilt was an object to inspire disgust and loathing rather than pity or love. It seemed such a needless state, such a uselessly degrading position that she could scarcely force herself to approach him. But by a determined effort she spoke cheerfully, and forbore looking at him because she saw it made him angry.

"Cora made you some tea, Ed. and I coaxed her to let me bring it up, as your head was aching so badly. Won't you drink it?"

Ed shuddered at the sound of her voice, and shrank as though from a blow.

Her manner, her words, her very voice reminded him painfully, but vividly, of his gentle step-mother, who had come up to his room with a cup of tea on the morning after he had first come home intoxicated. How tenderly and sorrowfully she had talked with him then! He remembered now, more clearly than at any time since she died, how pale she had looked that morning, how feeble and languid she had seemed, and how she had trembled from the exertion of coming upstairs. How his face had burned with shame, feeling that he could never look into her pure face again, now he had disgraced himself. He had promised her, humbly enough, that he would never enter a saloon again, and

while she lived, he had kept his word. But, since, there had been so much to drive him into dissipation that he had scarcely cared what he did. Even his father's tenderest words had been:

"I'll horsewhip you within an inch of your life, you dog, if ever I catch you drunk again."

CHAPTER X.

Bethany.

Lele left Ed's room almost disheartened. She had talked with him gently, affectionately, earnestly, as only a loving Christian wife, sister or mother can. She had begged him, as he valued decency and manhood in this world and peace in the next, to dissolve the partnership in the firm of "Satan and Fairfax," of which he was the junior member, taken into the firm only to be fleeced and ruined.

How much influence she had wielded she could not tell, when she left the room and went sadly down stairs again. Her usually buoyant spirits had deserted her, and she felt depressed and sorrowful. She feared that it was but a repetition of her talk with Jennie, so far as any hopeful results were concerned. And it saddened her, too, to observe that her aptitude for making friends had deserted her. Even Syd appeared averse to cultivating her friendship, and her very father ignored her. The only drop of consolation lay in the fact that she had won little Tude.

* * * * * *

Contrary to anticipation, Mr. Fairfax called Lele into the sitting-room the moment she went down stairs.

and continued to talk to her until near noon, which should have established friendly relations between them; but as the talk ran almost exclusively upon a new turnpike which he had been chiefly instrumental in securing, not much progress was made.

Lele listened at first with interest, then with patience. But finding the theme inexhaustible if not interrupted, she finally attempted to change the subject by questioning him concerning family affairs.

"Well, really," he said, removing his gold eyeglass for the fiftieth time and polishing them with his silk handkerchief, "I have but little time to see to the farm; I leave that mostly to Syd. My tenants are, as I understand, a very shackling set of fellows. I have never succeeded in securing any that bring me any profit, and I am sure I can not tell why, for they all come well recommended. Syd is to blame, I think, for their doing so badly. If he only had the knack of getting along better with his workmen, there would be no trouble. But he expects perfection, and when he finds in a tenant any of the little foibles that the class seem to claim as a right, he has a falling out with them, and their usefulness is at an end. There's Jack Grimes, now — a better fellow never lived, only he likes beer and fishing too well. And Scott Higgins and his boys would rather work for anybody than themselves. Syd has been trying for some time to get them all off the place, but I tell him that if he can't get along with the Grimes-Higgins faction, he couldn't do any better with

a new set. He's spoiled every tenant I ever had just by giving away to his temper, which is brittle as glass. I tell him he really never will succeed until he learns more self-control. I've given him most of the farm management for the last four or five years, as I had so many public duties to attend to, and thought it would be a splendid opportunity to develop him as a farmer. But, as I said, he doesn't appear to be doing any good. I fear he will never master the art of making money. Things are getting in worse shape here very year; debts are accumulating, and there seems no prospect, the way things are, of ever being able to pay out."

"I did not know this until I came here," Lele replied. "I always imagined you one of the most prosperous farmers in the State. Aunt Roxy thought so, I am sure, or she would have done more for Ed."

"Oh—*Ed!*" Mr. Fairfax looked disgusted. "The boy is a perfect shack, Lele, not worth his salt. Won't work unless he's driven to it; wants to be a machinist—*fiddlesticks!* He couldn't oil an old clock without smashing it. Ed thinks he's above farming, while if he did but know it, he's fit for nothing else. A man must be educated before he's fit for much else; but Ed has *no* education. When I sent him to the district school he played hookey most of the time, or busied himself by whittling grotesque toys, which kept up a hubbub among the little ones, and several times came near getting him expelled. He's been a regular rab-

scab all his days — case of acute moral depravity, in my opinion — and if I ever let him get away among strangers he'll land in the penitentiary. Farming's the best occupation for young men without much capital, anyhow, and if they grow up uneducated, as my boys have, it's about their only hope of ever being independent. A man, you know, must be *educated* before he can be fit for any other business; *but any fool can farm.* Fact is, Lelia, I've noticed it all my life — the less learning a man has, the better he can farm. The more he reads, the less he makes. Syd would succeed far better if he read less. Here he takes a lot of farm papers with their ridiculous expensive ways of doing everything — be better off without them. It makes him discontented to pick up a paper and read how fortunes have been made from all sorts of impossible things. Like Jean, now "— her step-father rarely called her Jennie — "*she's* got crack-brained on the subject of singing. A few years ago she was as happy and contented a creature as you would wish to see. Then along comes a music-beaddled professor out for a summer vacation among our hills, and pretends to discover that the child has a wonderful voice — one that would, if cultivated, make her famous. He said four or five years' training would make a second Patti of her. Stuff and nonsense! The fellow deserved a booting. Jean sings quite well, it is true; but as for making a second Patti! The thing is preposterous. I tried to make her see the folly of listening to such

blarney; but she was so disappointed at being compelled to stay at home and keep house after her mother died, instead of teaching and studying vocal music, that she gradually degenerated into the morose, fickle-tempered creature you see her. It will take years to put that folly out of her head. Whatever you do, don't encourage her in it."

"Let me see," reflected Lele, when alone; "Syd reads too much and therefore is a failure as a farmer. Ed is uneducated and so fit for nothing *but* farming. Jennie, being a woman, must remain at home and drudge for this large family, while the whole bent of her nature is toward music, and even a piano denied her. My dear father, you are short-sighted and narrow-minded. Yes, you are *cruel* to force these young people out of the course Nature intended them to pursue into one wholly distasteful."

Unpleasant as it had been to listen to these criticisms, Lele had been glad enough to get this new inkling into the cause of Jean's acrimony. It would help her much in her intercourse with the wayward girl. But to hear her father, a hale, hearty man, in the prime of life, condemning his sons in such unmeasured terms, made her ears tingle. It was not only the boys that had failed in management, the father proclaimed himself openly as the greater failure — a neglectful, unwise parent.

"I should have been like the rest if I had grown up under his influence," she thought.

She went to the kitchen to see if dinner was ready, as it was past 12, and she wished to leave for Sunday-school before 1. To her surprise, the fire had not even been kindled, Jennie not being in the habit of getting dinner until 2 o'clock on Sunday.

"I had intended to start for Sunday-school before 1," said Lele, vexed in spite of her efforts at self-control.

"Oh, well, I'll kindle the fire an' get dinner as soon as I can," said Jennie, with the air of a kitchen martyr. "The chicken won't cook in half an hour, of course."

"Don't hurry dinner on my account; I'll eat a piece," said Lele, making a supreme effort to speak cheerfully.

"Eat a piece!" Jennie looked at Lele as though it was she whose manners were at fault.

"I'll wait for church if you'll go with me," said Lele, conquering her temper at last.

"No, thank you," said Jennie, dryly; "I don't care to walk a mile and a half through the dust at this time of day. One trip will do you, I guess," she added, sourly. "The *elite* of the neighborhood will sweep by you in their fine carriages. You'll be covered with dust from head to foot."

"Dust, heat and fine carriages have no terrors for me," said Lele, taking a bite out of a green apple that Cora had offered her. "You needn't hurry dinner,

Jennie," she repeated. "I'll eat some bread and butter and have my chicken and canned corn when I return."

"Never saw such a girl in my life!" declared Charlie, when Lele was out of hearing. "She'd walk up to a government mule and take him by the heels for a dare, I *do* believe. If she keeps on she'll make Sister Sniffles ashamed of herself yet."

Tude, when found, would not consent at first to leave without her dinner, when they were to have chicken and canned corn, not to mention peach preserves and float. But Lele's coaxing prevailed, and the two soon set out, after lunching on cold fried ham and bread and butter. Jennie watched them enviously from the kitchen window, for Lele was dressed very little better after all than she would have been. She had set out suitably clad for a dusty walk, leaving all her finery at home.

"I might have gone with her, after all,' she thought, discontentedly. "I guess she'll not attract much attention in *that* rig."

Lele's total lack of self-consciousness made everything she wore seem suited to her; but Jennie was the style of girl to require handsome clothes; her consciousness of every little defect made the defect itself glaring. In consequence, a costume that one could have worn with ease and grace would have racked the other's soul with torture.

The walk was, as Lele had anticipated, long, hot and dusty. Like one of Mr. Fairfax's "philippics," it

seemed interminable; but the end was reached at last. The gray stone walls of Bethany Church appeared among the trees, and Lele entered upon a new experience as she passed its weather-beaten portals.

Little whiffs of heated air came in through the long windows of Bethany Church, and made those who were reckless enough to venture forth to Sunday-school on such a burning afternoon more acutely conscious of discomfort. Even Ward Collins looked sleepy, and Ward was noted for being bright and jolly even under the most trying circumstances.

"How dull you are, Polly," said Keith Hubbard; "must have been up *unusually* late last night."

"Yes, I was over at Lowell at a *fete;* had a beastly slow time — not a girl there I knew!"

"And how did it happen Maud didn't go?" asked Keith with assumed carelessness.

"Oh, we've quit."

"You're always telling that, and yet you never *do* quit. I guess you're likely to marry."

"You're badly off, old fellow. I'm not going there any more at all. Maud keeps too many fellows on the string to suit me."

"*You* never flirt, of course."

"Not very seriously. There come Morris and Ol Stuart arm in arm, as usual. They make me tired."

"I say, Polly, since you're out with Maud," suggested Keith with studied indifference, "I guess I'll call there this evening."

"I don't care," said Ward, listlessly.

"There she comes up the aisle now," said Keith in a nervous whisper. "Polly, I'm in luck; she's favored me with a beaming smile and never glanced at you."

"I don't care," said Ward again, in a tone of deeper dejection.

"But, Polly"—

"Don't Polly me," retorted Ward, beginning to be half angry. And then suddenly, as his eyes wandered to the door, they lit up with a flash of delight. "Oh, Hubby, who is that deliciously pretty girl coming in? She's a new one to me."

"That? Old Fairfax's daughter, I suppose. I heard she had come. She's a right good-looking girl."

"Hubby, you're an idiot. She's as sweet as a peach, and I'm dying for an introduction. Stay! I think I can contrive to get one."

He beckoned the superintendent and whispered a few words in his ear. There were objections, but Ward persisted, and finally, as he had requested, Miss Fairfax was induced to teach the class consisting of Ward Collins, Keith Hubbard, Morris St. John and Ol Stuart.

Lele looked somewhat rebellious when she discovered who were to be her pupils; but the whole class and superintendent offering one combined entreaty for her to remain, she took charge, temporarily, in the absence of the regular teacher.

Lele wore a pale blue gingham dress very plainly

made, and a wide, drooping hat of rough, white straw. She was a slender, graceful girl, and everything she wore seemed suited to her. No one ever saw her with an ill-fitting gown, or glove, or shoe. But she did not care for dress, except that it should be suited to the occasion. She would never have thought of donning handsome and stylish garments to walk a mile and a half through the dust with Tude to church. But she would have been a fascinating girl in a much less attractive costume than she wore. The exquisite tints of her complexion, the lovely eyes under the long, brown lashes, the delicately penciled eyebrows, glossy brown hair and sensitive, sweet, expressive mouth would have won attention for her from any one. Lele was not a girl to be slighted on any account, and, as a matter of fact, she never had been slighted until she came home. As she sat there, chatting over the lesson with those four respectful, eagerly attentive young men she felt in her natural element again. She seemed to have re-entered a healthy, happy, care-free, social atmosphere.

There was five minutes' intermission before service began, and Ward, at least, made good use of the time in forming her acquaintance. The impression the gay, good-natured young fellow made was far from disagreeable.

A long, dull sermon was preached to a weary and nodding congregation. The flies buzzed in the windows, the hot sun poured in through the uncurtained

panes; in the tree-tops outside the faint breezes sickened and died. The air was full of far-away summer sounds, and the perfume of roses in the church-yard. A few couples sat on slabs under the weeping willow and flirted decorously all during the sermon, under the scrutinizing eye of Mrs. Stuart, who sat bolt upright in one of the front pews and noted the text and points of the sermon in her intervals of espionage over the young people in the churchyard. Mrs. Stuart was more than a pillar; she was a sort of modern, Americanized Mrs. McFadyan. The sick and missing were frequently regaled with a rehash of the sermon from her lips.

Maud St. John, far less devout, was sorry throughout the sermon that her propensity for flirting had temporarily alienated Ward. Though she felt that his attentions to the young stranger were probably only prompted by jealousy — which indeed was largely true — it was possible that he might soon become really interested in a girl like Lele, which was highly undesirable, since Ward was so far the best "catch" she had ever found.

Keith Hubbard sat also with his mind abstracted from the sermon through the whole preaching hour. If Lele only *would* captivate Ward, and thus leave him a fair field in which to win Maud! Alice Stuart, in her turn, cast shy glances at Keith, his image sadly disturbing the reflection of the sermon in her soul. Keith was the only beau Alice had ever had in all the

twenty years of her life, and he had only occasionally called when Maud had other company. Alice, who was a devout little thing, prayed fervently in her foolish young heart, not for the heathen, as the minister suggested, but that Ward would "make it up for good" with Maud, and Keith return to *her*.

Mrs. Stuart always required the children to repeat the text when they returned from church. Alice wondered if she ever could forget this one:

"As a lily among thorns, so is *my love* among the daughters!" shouted forth at short intervals until it finally rang meaningless.

"That's just twenty-five times he has said it," whispered Ward in Lele's ear. "I do believe he means the text expressly for you. There goes twenty-six, I declare!" And again, for lack of discourse, apparently, the same words were called out in tones of thunder from the pulpit.

"It's appropriate," said Ward. "I never *shall* forget it."

The deacons sat like graven images in the Amen corner, one fast asleep, the other busily speculating on the probabilities of rain before he got his wheat all put up. The preacher repeated the text a few more times, prosed away another half-hour without once formulating the shadow of a practical idea, and finally, to everybody's intense relief, got through, and the congregation, making a combined rush for the shady churchyard, settled down to what seemed the real

object of their coming out on such a blistering afternoon — a thorough exchange of gossip. The only ones who did not enjoy it were twelve men who had remained outside to discuss chinch bugs, and were now out of something to talk about.

Ward Collins was beside Lele with that perfect assurance of being wanted that not more than one in a thousand can assume without appearing "pushing."

"You'll not mind if I stay with you and introduce you to some people?" he questioned with boyish frankness. "I don't believe any of your folks are here, are they?"

"None but Tude, and I don't see her," replied Lele, glancing about her.

"I saw Tude and some of those Grimes children chasing a pig up the road shortly after Sunday-school — one of their pets, probably, that had escaped from its pen. So as you are alone, I'll be glad to accompany you home, if you'll let me," looking at her with heightened color and just the faintest show of diffidence.

"How kind you are," said Lele, with graceful acceptance of the proffered attention. "I hope I shall not be taking you out of your way."

"No; you couldn't!" with a smile and glance that turned the words into a compliment.

Ward introduced a nice, fair, middle-aged woman and a little boy in blonde curls and the sweetest of

Fauntleroy suits, as his mother and his little brother. The latter glanced knowingly at Lele while his mother talked.

"I know you, I do," he said. "Don't let on what I told you, will you?"

"Why, when did you ever meet Miss Fairfax?" asked Ward. "I guess you must be mistaken in the lady, Roy."

"I guess I ain't, either," retorted Roy. "*Didn't* you see me playin' in the mud one evenin'," appealing to Lele.

"Yes, I believe I did. I hope you caught no cold from playing in the mud."

"No; but Ward found me an' paddled me for stayin' out so late, an' I throwed mud on his white vest so he couldn't go to the party at Stuart's," said Roy, holding his hat, brim down, with both hands, and kicking out first one short fat leg and then the other.

"Roy is a case, Miss Fairfax," said Ward. "And some time when he is holding to his hat-brim in that style it will give way and let him fall over backward and break his backbone. Lots of little boys," added the teasing brother gravely, "break their backs in just that way, and have to crawl around like woolly worms all the rest of their days."

"Oh, you big story-teller!" defiantly. "You're always tellin' me that, an' I ain't never fell yet, an' I ain't goin' to; so there!" But, as if in contradiction, an extra flourish of his defiant heels stretched him

flat on the grass, where his terrified howls brought a number of girls to his assistance.

Maud St. John was the first to snatch up the "dear, darling child" and ask if he was much hurt, knocking over a poor woman's toddling baby in her excitement, and not even pausing to inquire whether *it* was hurt. Whereat Ward, repressing a smile, winked at Keith, who, in turn, repressed a sigh, and walked off.

"How do, Maud," said Ward, with just a spice of malice in his gay voice. "My friend, Miss St. John, Miss Fairfax."

Maud held out her hand with a most captivating smile.

"So glad to welcome you to Bethany Ridge," she said. "I heard you had come here to stay, and hope it is true."

"No, Maud, you don't hope any such thing," Ward thought, while Lele was discoursing upon the probable brevity of her visit. "But I hope she will."

Lele had seen Maud and a pretty brunette whispering about her over their fans. Before long the pretty brunette came up and was introduced as his sister. She was very unlike Ward in manner and appearance, and did not make any friendly advances toward improving her acquaintance with Lele. She merely bowed, spoke a few polite nothings as she took in the details of Lele's toilette, and then excused herself on the plea that her escort was waiting. Morris St. John had just driven up to the church steps and

stood ready to assist her into the buggy. He bowed and smiled to Lele as they drove away, but Trix never turned her head. Maud St. John was her best friend, and it always angered her to see Ward interested in any other girl. Trix meant that some day Maud should be a sister to her in more ways than one. As for those Fairfaxes — bah! she *hated* them.

"If you are not particular about going soon, we'll not hurry," said Ward, in that jolly tone, as Lele began to recover from the chill of his sister's presence. "There are lots of people here who will be glad to meet you, Miss Fairfax."

Lele was in no hurry, so they lingered, and Ward contrived to introduce her to nearly all the young people present. The St. John girls interested her more than the others, Maud in particular, since she was supposed to have wrought such havoc with Syd's heart. Maud was a blonde and very attractive. Kitty, though plainer, seemed far more friendly. She would have monopolized the whole attention if she could. Charlie had aptly nick-named her "Maud's Burr," because she always attached herself to whoever would otherwise be in Maud's way. She was not clever, but what she lacked in wit, she made up in cheek. And it was wonderful how useful she could make herself upon occasion.

The half-hour allotted to gossip sped quickly enough, and Ward, always delighted to form the acquaintance of a pretty girl, and one who, moreover,

could prove herself attractive to others, felt strangely elated when he assisted her into his new buggy and drove away with his matched blacks prancing in their silver-mounted harness. The other fellows stood back and stared at him in blank envy. Ward laughed when he thought of the row of dolorous faces.

CHAPTER XI.

Venus and Diana.

"I guess you came the Ridge road, didn't you, Miss Fairfax?" Ward asked. "It's the nearest, but, if you don't mind, we'll go back by the sawmill. It isn't half so dusty, and besides you'll get a chance to see the new pike your father is interested in."

"Oh, let's go by way of the new pike," said Lele. "I may not get another chance of seeing it while I'm here."

"Are you going so soon?" looking disappointed.

"The last of the week, I think."

"The last of the *week?*" echoed Ward. "Why, Miss Fairfax, don't think of going away until after the Danbury Fair. It's the *event* of the whole summer. Everybody goes, and the ones who don't have a good time must be *incapable* of enjoying themselves. I often wonder if there was another set of young people who have as much fun as we on Bethany Ridge, especially during the fair. It's a carnival, I tell you."

"Which proves that you must be 'in the swim' in order to see the bright side of life," thought Lele.

"I was hoping I might have the pleasure of being your escort on Thursday or Friday," he went on. "It's not far off — only till the first week in August."

"That seems very distant to me," said Lele, thoughtfully. "I could not make any engagement so far ahead, thank you."

"If, however, you are here at that time, I want you to remember that my buggy is at your service."

"I am not in the least danger of forgetting," said Lele, smiling.

As the buggy glided into a byroad shaded by tall trees, Ward drew rein and made the high-stepping, shiny-coated steeds travel at a more leisurely speed.

"I like this road on a hot afternoon," he said, with a sigh of content which was the very keynote of his gay, care-free nature. "It is so cool and delicious here that one does not even wish to hurry, though a mad race through the dust would suit my horses much better. How do you like my new matches, Miss Fairfax? This is the first time I ever drove them together."

"I never saw a handsomer team," said Lele, thinking how delightful it would be to possess them. "Have you just bought them?"

"No; I've had the off one for three years — raised it, in fact. The other came into my possession last week. It's a colt that Syd McKnight raised, intending to keep it as a buggy horse for his sisters. But for some reason his step-father sold it and the buggy, too, just as its training was completed. We had offered to buy it from Syd, but he wouldn't part with the animal at all. Isn't she a beauty? Syd and I got up quite a

rivalry to see who could keep his colt in the best condition. We were as careful of them as if they were worth thousands. After all the horse names in the calendar had been suggested, we named them Venus and Diana, for we wanted nothing common like Bet or Doll, Kit or Bell. Oh, dear, what a pet Venus used to be at your house. And I don't wonder when I think what a time they had raising her, and how, owing to their bad fences, she had been hurt several times, and doctored and cared for like a human being. You ought to have heard the girls cry when the man took her away. Even Syd did, I guess."

"I don't see how papa could sell her if she belonged to Syd," said Lele, indignantly.

"Don't you?" Ward flecked a horsefly skillfully from one of Diana's shining flanks and hesitated. "I don't care to meddle in your affairs, Miss Fairfax, so I won't say *how* he came to dispose of her.. It might be that I didn't get the story straight, anyhow. I wouldn't have mentioned the story at all, only Syd was unjust enough to blame *me* for having her sold. I offered to buy her of him, to be sure, for I thought it might be he'd have to sell, and if he did, I wanted her. I wouldn't have resorted to trickery to get her from Syd for the world, though there's a current belief here on Bethany Ridge that horse-trading sins don't count. But I wouldn't have driven Venus to-day if I'd known I was going to your home, for Syd won't like to see me driving her. *I* wouldn't if I were in

his place. I never saw any one so cut up as he was after his step-father sold her. But some people never consider — oh! I mustn't forget that I'm talking about your father, Miss Fairfax."

"Were you and Syd friends before that?"

They were skirting the grim black sawmill with its piles of lumber.

"We used to go to school together, and were great friends indeed. Jen and I were friends, too. In fact, we were sweethearts from the time we were in our A-b-Abs until we got into our teens. Then somehow we drifted apart. She used to keep me supplied with cake, because I never could get enough — I tell you, her mamma could make good ones! — and I provided her liberally with nuts and apples, made rings for her out of bone buttons, and baskets and other trinkets from peach stones. We were happy, rollicking children in those days, Miss Fairfax."

Ward paused, but Lele appeared so interested that he involuntarily continued:

"Jen and I were always in the same classes, but Syd, though nearer my own age, was away ahead of me in everything. He used to solve my problems for me, and help me over the hard places. We were seatmates year after year, and as I was usually in mischief, his good conduct was all that saved me from disgrace. Whenever the teacher became aware that there was disorder in our part of the room, I was generally down half under the desk looking for a book, while Syd at

my side was working away at his everlasting arithmetic, steady as a clock. My! what larks I had with old Syd to screen me!"

Ward looked a little pensive when he recalled the happy old school days gone forever, and with them much of the friendship that had added zest to their joy.

"Syd and Jen are changed since then," he resumed. "They have grown so reserved and cool that I hardly know what to make of them. It isn't all about Venus, of course." A pause. "But now I've bought her I don't expect either of them will ever speak to me again. I know I shouldn't criticise them to you"—

"It isn't as though I had always known them. I am a stranger in my own father's house, Mr. Collins. You are much better acquainted with the family than I am," Lele replied. "But I have been led to believe that they have reason to be a little cool toward some of their neighbors."

"The Collinses, for instance," said Ward, with a slight grimace. "Well, I know there are financial reasons for both parties being a little standoffish. You remember the old story of the 'poor debtor'—'the unfortunate debtor'—that used to be in one of the old school readers? A man is apt to consider a neighbor a public benefactor if he will assume the character of creditor; but the longer he keeps that character, the more odious he gets in the eyes of his debtor. My father's heart isn't made of eider-down, to be sure;

but neither is he the ogre that some suppose. You would rather like him, I think, if you knew him."

"It's absurd," Ward went on, "for Syd and Jennie to consider the Collins family mortal enemies just because their step-father owes my father money. But here I am running on about my affairs like a confounded goose. Let's talk of something else."

"No, go on," coaxed Lele. "I want to get a correct estimate, if I can, of Syd's and Jennie's characters. I confess they puzzle me."

"I was just going to add: I know there are people in the world who have been less lucky than I have, and can't, in consequence, enjoy themselves as well. And from such I take a good deal, though the treatment I get from Syd and Jen fairly paralyzes me sometimes. But here we are. Will you hold the lines while I open the gate?"

Ward's fingers touched the small white hands that grasped the lines, and a conscious look dawned in each pair of eyes. He hitched the matched blacks to the rack with nervous haste, and blushed with pleasure as he assisted Lele to alight. He wished that he might have been longer about it. For the twentieth time Ward had fallen dead in love at first sight.

"I'm afraid I've made the drive awfully dull for you," he said, as he opened the little gate.

"Oh, no, no, indeed!" said Lele, with burning cheeks.

"It was so short," sighed Ward. "We might have

gone ever so much further." ("And I might have talked of something better worth while than the crankinesses of these confounded Fairfaxes," he added, mentally.)

"I enjoyed it very much," said Lele.

"I wonder," thought Ward, "how I could have enjoyed the Fair so much last year without this delightful girl. How lucky I am to have met her!"

He felt as though stepping on air as he went with Lele along the flower-bordered gravel walk, up the veranda steps, and into the stuffy and gloomy parlor, which their presence seemed to brighten and renovate strangely.

No one would have supposed, from the solitary appearance of the old farm house, that the hall had, when they first came in sight, been full of young people, some reading, others talking. A signal from Tude had startled the whole group.

"Yes, *sir!*" she excitedly exclaimed, peering down the road through the honeysuckle vines, "she's a-coming, and she's got a new beau, too. Ward Collins is a-bringing her in his new buggy, all a-glittering in the sun — enough to dazzle your eyes. Can't I run down the lane and open the gate for them and tell them about the pig?"

"No, you *can't,*" said Jennie. "Clear out of here, all of you. Who wants Ward Collins to come in and catch you in your bare feet and dirty clothes?"

"Clear the track!" shouted Clem, making a hideous

racket in escaping through the back porch into the dining room.

"Must we all hustle?" asked Charlie, who lay comfortably on the floor reading the new book which Lele had given him. "I'd rather stay back of the door and trip him up scientifically as he comes in."

"Charlie *Fairfax!* Get up, quick," said Jennie, positively.

"Now, Caudle, listen to reason," went on the provoking boy. "If I trip him up and he falls and sprains his ankle"—

Jean cut short his remarks with one of her lightning glances, and taking Tude silently by the arm, jerked her (still pleading to be allowed to stay and tell about the pig) across the porch and into the dining room, followed slowly by Charlie and Cora. The whole party continued in full retreat until they reached the kitchen, where Syd, having spent most of the day in wandering over the farm, deep in thought over his seemingly hopeless future, now sat reading.

"Dear me! What *is* the matter?" he asked, laying down his paper. "Have you seen a rattlesnake in the honeysuckles?"

"Worse! Lele's got a beau," answered Charlie.

Syd experienced pangs of guilty disappointment. All his airy castles of the morning and of last night's vigils sank into shadowy ruin.

"I didn't know she had any acquaintances here

except ourselves," he contrived to say. "Wasn't Tude with her?"

"Yes, but she had to bring back one of the pigs that had got out — saved her bacon, you might say," Charlie answered; "so Lele was left. Did you ever know a member of this family to go anywhere that we didn't have to stop to fix a fence, or bring back a hog, or drive somebody's cows out of the corn?"

"It is Ward Collins who has brought her home, Syd," explained Cora, making a little face.

Syd felt much as he would have done had she announced the failure of a bank in which all the money he possessed was deposited.

"And he's driving Venus," added Clem. "She shines like black satin, and keeps looking around as if she knew she had come home and wanted to stay. Jen, can't I go out and give her a lump of sugar?"

"No," said Jen, harshly, but her lashes were heavy with tears.

"No use, Clem; she's not our horse now," said Cora, sighing. "It seems like a dream that Venus should belong to Ward Collins."

Jennie stood doggedly with her back to the window that she might not see her former pet, for Venus had loved Jen and followed her about through the yard like a dog. The creature seemed to possess almost human intelligence, and would pick grass daintily all around the flower-beds, never trampling a flower or

vine; and the children had taught her almost as many tricks as a show horse.

"She knows she's come home, bless her dear old bones," said Charlie, with a little break in his boyish voice.

"If we had only known what we were raising her for"— began Cora in her most plaintive accents.

Syd couldn't endure any more. "Cora, stop," he said, impatiently. "What's the use of all this? She's only a horse, and we've lost her."

"Yes, and we'll never have another as good. That's flat," mourned Cora.

"Well, for pity's sake talk of something else. I'm sick of this."

There was a long pause.

"Jean, you'll have to go in and entertain Lele and Ward," said Cora, trying to put Venus out of her mind.

"I don't intend to," said Jennie.

Syd turned around and gave her a swift, angry glance.

"Don't act so, Jen, for heaven's sake. You *ought* to go in."

"I've nothing fit to wear,' said the girl, almost piteously.

"Wear your lawn dress, Jinsey," said Cora, kindly. "I'm sure it looks as nice as Lele's gingham. And you can wear my breastpin."

"That old short-waisted thing!" exclaimed Jennie,

disdaining to notice Charlie's interpolation of "Who ever heard of a short-waisted breastpin!"

"Why don't you fix it over, then, so you *can* wear it?" asked Syd, irritably.

"I've nothing like the goods to fix it with."

"Couldn't you take a piece out of the skirt and make puffs for the sleeves?" asked Clem.

"Hardly, when it is so skimpy now that I am ashamed to walk across the floor with it."

"The skirt ain't so bad," suggested Charlie, critically; "it's the sleeves that make you look like Noah's wife coming out of the ark. You ought to see Maud St. John's new sleeves — regular stunners. Tell you, Maud has the style!"

"Oh, consarn it all!" exclaimed Jennie, walking furiously across the floor. "I don't believe there ever was such a family as we are."

"A very just remark, Mrs. Bedott, very just," said Charlie, sniffling.

"I feel sometimes that I could begin an' kick till the earth went to atoms," said Jennie. "If I could give it one hard kick for every time I've been mortified and humiliated there'd be a slight earthquake anyhow; and I wouldn't care if it was strong enough to cause every house on Bethany Ridge to tumble down."

"Except ours," suggested Syd.

"I wouldn't miss ours if it would bury me in the ruins."

"Jin, you're so wicked. I'd think you'd dread seein' a cloud come up for fear the lightning would strike you," said Cora, looking at her sister reproachfully over a piece of pie she was eating. Times were serious indeed when Cora could not draw comfort from a section of one of Jen's flakey-crusted pies.

"Well, if I'm to be struck by lightning for being poor and miserable, I can't help it," said Jennie.

"You're as unreasonable as a Populist," Syd declared. "Talk more like a rational being."

"You'll get punished for your talk!" warned Tude.

"Oh, of course. Something always happens. Very likely a hailstorm will come up to-morrow and cut the flowers to pieces when I've nearly killed myself giving them a start, or wipe out the garden just as the peas are getting big enough to eat."

"If a hailstorm followed *every* complaint," commented Charlie, "we should have a return of the glacial period in short order."

"Other people," Jennie went on, "can work on Sunday or what not and yet prosper. Look at old Si Col" —

"Hush, Jen, they'll hear you."

"I don't care. Ward knows what an old skinflint he is, and how he has his men set tobacco on Sunday, and goes around coaxing other people's hands away in harvest. Ward's mean, too, or he'd never have brought Venus here. He came home with Lele on purpose to

taunt us with the sight of her. He knows as well as anybody how it hurt us to part with her. Such a gentle little thing as she was, and we girls could drive her anywhere. While now we haven't any way to go only to walk"—

"Now, Jenkins, I wonder if we haven't all heard that often enough! Hush up, and go in and speak to Ward, for manners' sake anyhow. If you had more diplomacy, you'd get on twice as well with people."

"Well, if you'd farm better I could afford better clothes, and wouldn't have to cover up my rags with diplomacy," flashed Jen.

The taunt went through the sensitive brain of her brother like a thunderbolt. Was this the way, after all, that he was providing for his mother's children? He had never before realized what an important thing nice dresses may be to a girl. And how was he doing his duty in this line by poor Jen? Badly enough, he knew. But to save his life he could not, under present circumstances, do better. Mortified and hurt, Syd resolved to cut short the conversation as soon as possible.

He left the room in silence, followed in hot haste by his repentant sister, who called to him to stop, that she might apologize for the taunt she should have been too wise to utter. But he never heeded her. Perhaps he didn't hear.

A lump rose in Jennie's throat. Half suffocated

with contending emotions, she rushed out into the garden, and, flinging herself down on a bench under one of the dwarf pear trees, burst into tears.

"Whatever *does* possess me to act so?" she wondered, as she lay there with her apron over her head, sobbing her passionate heart out. "What am I good for, anyhow? Nothing, as Charlie says, but to scold and bake pies. What a hideous thing life is!"

She sat and looked around, wondering if she could ever forget that day of humiliation. Not many in her experience had been more poignantly void of satisfaction. It was such a fine summer day, too; so still, with the hot sunshine steeping the green and blossoming world in glory, and she could see no beauty in it. Every bird that sang mocked her, and every flower that blossomed seemed to turn its little face away from her in scorn.

Even the way she had treated Lele, which had not hurt her much at first, began to add to her sense of defeat and self-reproach. What matter that the bees were flying home from the old linden tree in the hollow laden with the sweetest honey of the year; that the air was heavy with the perfume of clover, that hummingbirds were thick among the honeysuckles, and the holy Sabbath peace was over all? Jean's heart was ready to burst.

The chief cause of the present outburst was not her recent tiff with Syd, though that had precipitated the storm of tears. It was not the mortgage, which was a

tear-producer at short notice any time; not the sight of Venus, with all the bitter memories roused thereby; nor the fear of poverty; nor all combined, that had rendered that particular Sunday afternoon a miserable one for the entire family.

There had been a time when Trixie Collins was Jen's most intimate friend and Ward her boy lover. This explains "a whole lot," as Charlie would have put it. It was not enough that Lele must have the good gifts all her life,— music and fine clothes, an education and what not,— which to Jean had been denied. She must needs come home, and, at a moment's notice, captivate the one man in all the world that Jennie would have cared to win! This was the crowning offense in the category of Lele's unpremeditated wrong-doings, and made the jealous girl feel for her rival a deeper hatred.

No wonder that "scraping pots and kettles in somebody else's kitchen at two dollars a week," instead of presiding over a happy home of her own, was one of the visions which imagination conjured up to torture the mind of the unhappy girl. Jennie cried hysterically at the prospect of such a future, against which she rebelled with all the force of her passionate nature.

"I will *not* end my days in poverty and degradation," she cried, striking her clenched hand against the rough bark of the old pear tree. "I was no more created for such a fate than was Maud St. John or Trix Collins. And as for staying here to see Lele Fairfax

marry Ward — I'll run away and drown myself, or join a band of strolling players! How much more of this *can* I stand, anyhow?"

* * * * * *

Ward's call had been a brief one, and Lele was by this time in her room, watching him from behind the curtains as he drove away with his prancing steeds, and his new buggy all a-glitter in the sunlight.

Ah, well! Lele was young, too, and fancy free. He was a Collins, but for all that the most thoroughly companionable young fellow she had ever met.

She spent the next hour by the open window, weaving fantastic day-dreams as she sat dreamily leaning against the casement, with her face upturned to the deep blue summer sky.

To Lele the world was beautiful, for life and love lay before her. She had never had a lover. No wonder that Ward Collins's blue eyes fascinated her. They were the handsomest eyes she had ever seen, and the most winning in expression. Besides there was something infectious in his fun and good humor. It did you good just to hear him laugh. And what a sweet tempered, forgiving young fellow he must be to ask for Jennie and Syd after the way they had slighted him of late! How mortifying to have to tell him that she could not find any of them except her father, who was, as usual on Sunday afternoons, asleep on the lounge. The boys had fled to the barn after Syd and Jennie left, and Cora and Tude to the orchard.

Lele, thus left alone, felt very solitary in the silent old house, with the quiet evening hours coming on and the tree toads beginning to chirp under the shadowy trees. But her thoughts were pleasant ones. Life was sweet. Lele felt so glad she was living in a world that held so much that was worth living for. No thought of fighting the battle of life single-handed was in her mind. No vision of "pots, kettles and obscure single blessedness" marred the picture.

CHAPTER XII.

Syd and Lele.

Mr. Fairfax had promised to accompany Lele that evening to the little family burying ground to see her mother's grave. And toward sunset they set out, but before they were fairly out of the yard one of the tenants appeared at the side gate in search of the man of the house.

"It is Grimes with some vexatious worry on hands, as usual," Mr. Fairfax said, testily. "Do you walk on and I'll see what's wanting, and follow you directly."

Lele went forward lingerly toward the inclosure on the hill west of the house, listening all the way for his approaching footsteps; but slowly as she walked, he never overtook her, and when she reached the inclosure at the top of the hill she was still alone.

Leaning on the little rustic gate, she gazed a while at the graves. There were a few monuments of white marble, some low, discolored tombstones and a few dismal gray slabs, one of the latter, half hidden by a clump of cedars near the gate, was "Sacred to the memory of Ebenezer Fairfax"— some unknown uncle who had died of consumption in the South, and had been brought home for burial. He was only twenty-one.

A spirit of peace seemed to brood over the spot. Not a sound broke the stillness except the cooing of a dove in the evergreens — no other sign of life appeared.

The long, white road at the foot of the meadow was deserted; the very sheep-bells tinkled afar off with rhythm like that of a running brook; not even a smoke-wreath curled upward from any of the numerous farm-houses that nestled beside the substantial bank barns in the vicinity. Bethany Ridge tabooed hot suppers on Sundays.

While the girl gazed dreamily over the sun-bathed landscape, some one came up the steep path toward her; but it was not Mr. Fairfax in his Sunday broadcloth and fine linen. It was only Syd, in a black satteen shirt, common-looking trousers and rusty cap, looking spiritless, jaded and out of sorts.

"He might have worn a coat," thought Lele, with the unreasonableness of her sex. Lele felt sorry to meet him; after her chat with jolly Ward his presence was distasteful, particularly as Ed's words came back vividly to mind.

"Your father says you will please excuse him from coming out," Syd said, in a mechanical fashion totally different from his manner the evening of her arrival. "A friend of his came just as Grimes left; so you needn't wait."

Lele could not but feel rather suspicious of Syd's motives in coming. And her tone sounded a trifle cool when she said:

"I'm sorry he couldn't come."

Far away on the Susquehanna they could hear the long, melodious whistle of a steamboat.

"Perhaps you won't care to stay without him?" said Syd, as the echoes died away among the hills.

"Oh, I don't mind," roused to pity by his despondency, which somehow sharpened his features and cast shadows under his eyes. "We do not seem to get so well acquainted as a brother and sister should, do we?"

"No, I'm afraid not, so far," opening the gate for her to pass through. "But don't mind if I seem dull and uncompanionable; it's my way."

"Since when, I wonder?" thought Lele, relenting toward him.

They walked on in silence until they reached the two mounds where the mother of each lay buried. Syd turned his head aside, for the tears blinded him. It was only two years since the sod had closed over the grave at his feet, and yet an eternity of grief and longing seemed to lie between then and now. There was a long silence, then a small, soft hand rested on his arm sympathetically, and a gentle voice said:

"We are both motherless, Syd. But you have brothers and sisters, while I — don't feel — as though I had — anybody."

The wistful tone struck a pang through the young fellow's soul. He involuntarily — moved by some swift impulse of sympathy — took the hand that rested on his arm and raised it to his lips. Lele totally mis-

understood him and looked up in blank dismay, startled and confused. Was the young fortune hunter trying to make love to her? She felt even more hurt than angry to see her step-brother in a rôle so contemptible.

Syd knew her thoughts instinctively, and his face crimsoned with shame. There was an embarrassed pause, during which she moved away a few steps with a downcast air; but he could see on her face a pained, chagrined look, as though she knew he entertained sentiments toward her that rendered his presence distasteful. He began explaining in a choked, stammering way, hardly able to utter three words consecutively without pausing:

"Lele, I don't think — I don't mean — You can think whatever else you please about me, but don't — for heaven's sake, believe *that*. I don't want — your money. I know — Ed — told you — I did. But if you — think — me — so — so degraded, so unprincipled, I'd "— He broke down. All he could add was, "I can't *bear* to have you — look at me — that way again."

He thought he had made an awful mess of it, and that Lele would feel justified in shunning him after this. Maud would, he knew. He heartily wished Lele was like her. It would be balm to his wounded pride to know that all women were heartless.

Instead, however, of turning from him coldly, as he deserved, perhaps, she seemed all at once to comprehend the situation, and after scrutinizing his haggard countenance a moment, she slipped her hand

through his arm again, and said in a tone that made him compare her to the sweetest angel in heaven:

"Syd, I understand and quite forgive you. Let us be real friends, real brother and sister. I know you are too noble to deceive me in any way, and I am not afraid to trust you. Oh, Syd, I *need* your friendship so much!"

"You shall have it, Lele," replied Syd, humbly. In his deep humility he would willingly have resigned her hand and fortune to any man worthy of her. He felt that he could never be that. But he would be to her always a true and loyal elder brother.

They slowly retraced their steps to the gate, talking as they went about the graves of by-gone relatives, their tones unconsciously low. Gradually the conversation drifted to family affairs, and Lele made some inquiries about the mortgage.

"It is to be foreclosed, I fear!" said Syd, briefly.

"Must the farm be sold, then?"

"I think so. I have done my utmost to save it, but I can't, I guess; in fact, I know I can't. The interest on the mortgage takes the bread out of our mouths and keeps us in shabby clothes the year around — all except your father; his salary dresses him. It ought to!" he added, bitterly; "*we* never see a penny of it."

'I wish there was something I could do," Lele replied, sadly. "But my aunt — you know the provisions of her will."

"Yes," Syd knew very well. Five hundred dol-

lars a year to render her niece independent until her marriage — to be expended only with the consent of her guardian. Lele might as well have been penniless so far as any freedom to help her father's family was concerned.

"I'm *sorry* I can't help you all," Lele reiterated.

"No matter. We shall feel more independent when everything is settled up, and we know for a certainty what we have."

He held his head erect and felt and looked more like himself. The burning blush of shame had passed away, and he could look his step-sister frankly in the eye again. The future, with all its poverty and privations, actually looked less appalling than life with Lele's money on his conscience. He was glad that independence so basely purchased was out of the question.

To make his renunciation complete, he resolved, before returning to the house, to test her opinion of Ward. That it was a very favorable one he did not doubt. They were both leaning over the low gate to the inclosure, with quite a brother and sister air. Syd plunged at once into the new subject: How did she like young Collins?

The question was unexpected, and the sensitive color flew to Lele's cheeks. She was not enough of a "society" girl to have lost the art of blushing.

"Oh, I see how it is. You like him. Girls always do." Syd looked away over the southern hills with a forlorn sinking of the heart that was by no means new. He had been jealous of Ward often enough, but was

this—jealousy? He scouted the idea. Why shouldn't Lele marry the fellow if she chanced to care for him and he for her?

He knew by instinct that Lele would ask him what sort of a fellow Ward was; and she did.

"Why didn't you come in and see your old friend this evening?" she asked. "Isn't he nice? Don't you like him any more?"

"Yes; he is nice, but I don't like him."

"Don't you think it may be your fault — a little?"

"Probably."

"Wouldn't it be better to make up with him?"

"You don't quite understand what you are asking, Lele. No; it wouldn't be better to make it up."

"Syd, be a good, kind-hearted brother and tell me why you are not friends any more. He told me about Venus, but said there were other things you quarreled about."

"Lele, do you really want me to tell you?"

"If it would be right for me to ask. I think you must have liked him very much when you were friends. He told me how intimate you two were, and how he still liked you. I wonder you do not try to keep friendly with him — on account of the mortgage, at least."

"I confess I have no diplomacy. Under some circumstances diplomacy is a contemptible trait, Lele."

"But you *were* friends."

"Ward and I were the dearest of friends until the last year or two. I believe I knew every thought in

his mind until he was nearly nineteen. He never did anything without first consulting me. A peculiarity of his nature is that he *must* have somebody stronger than he to lean on. And I like to be looked up to by 'weaker vessels.' I pass for a crusty old fellow now, and I *am* pretty crabbed I guess; but I used to be different. Lele, you may smile incredulously, but it's a fact — I actually thought at one time that I couldn't live without somebody or something to love." (That time would never be past for Syd.) "But when I lost confidence in—some people—everything seemed to go crossgrained with me. I became discouraged, impatient and irritable. Everything seemed to conspire against me. When I had Ward for a confidant, though I didn't tell him just everything as he did me, it was at least soothing to be with him, for he is normally an awfully sympathetic soul, and hasn't a particle of temper. Ward and my mother together kept the snarls smoothed pretty well out of my temper; but I lost her," (he looked wistfully toward the evening star with some lines of Whittier's in his mind, which were in Lele's mind, too,) "and that nearly killed me. After a time Ward and I fell out, and I felt somehow as though I had lost myself."

"But Jennie would have helped you, Syd, if you had let her."

"No; Jen means well, but as a confidante she's no good. Besides, *her* soul was in darkness, too: there were some things we sacredly refrained from mentioning to each other."

"Poor boy!" sighed Lele. "If I could only have been with you then! You would have been willing to make a confidante of me, wouldn't you, Syd?"

Syd felt the impulse to kiss her for that tone of loving sympathy.

"Heavens! if she could only have been with me then!" he thought. "Such a sister as Lele would let a few rays of sunshine into one's blackest days. God bless her." But he only said quite calmly aloud:

"Yes; I think so."

"Tell me why you quarreled with your friend."

"Oh, well — we both liked the same girl, and she finally liked him better than she did me. If I'd known it before I grew to care for her so much I think I could have forgiven Ward. She held me captive just until she felt sure of securing Ward, and then threw me over. I blamed him for deceiving me in the matter, too, though he was excusable, perhaps, on the theory that 'all things are fair in love and war.' When he tried to talk it over with me afterwards I wouldn't let him. There was nothing to be said, either to him or her."

"And they are to marry soon, I suppose?" said Lele, a trifle unsteadily.

"I don't think so. She never suited Ward, and I think he has grown tired of her. You would find it no trouble to cut her out."

"I don't intend to try," said Lele.

"Ward's eyes have failed to do execution, then, for the first time."

"Syd, at the risk of being thought a fool, I must say that I should fight very hard against falling in love with any farmer. I don't really believe the life of a farmer's wife would suit me."

"That was what Maud thought," replied Syd, bitterly. "I don't know that I ought to blame any woman for having a prejudice against farm life, since you share it."

"Never mind," said Lele, beginning to laugh. "I suppose if I ever fall in love, which isn't at all likely, I won't stop long, after all, to consider my future husband's occupation. Only I find farm life, both for men and women, so different from what I supposed, that I wonder you have the courage to go on with it."

"I *did* rebel against it once; it seemed such a plodding, brain-destroying industry; but I'm in for it now, and expect to stick to it. After all, it doesn't matter much where a fellow lives or what he does, so it's honest."

"And suitable," said Lele. "I don't think one's work can ever be thoroughly enjoyable if it goes against the grain of one's nature."

"Well, you needn't fret about your work, at any rate," said Syd. "I'm thankful you are provided for."

"Since I've been here I've been thinking seriously of going into some kind of business," said Lele. "I suppose teaching would suit me best."

"That's because I've made you think ill of Ward." said Syd, anxiously. "Don't misunderstand me, Lele. I've tried to be truthful about him. He's all right.

He couldn't help Maud preferring him, I suppose. He had everything and I nothing. What is there about *me* to attract any girl? Shabby clothes without a cent in the pockets, a careworn, unsmiling face, and a future obscured by poverty, are no recommendations to any man, especially when there is another around who is all grace and high spirits and elegance."

He let his head drop on his arm with a feeling of utter wretchedness. Both leaned over the gate in silence. It occurred to him that she might think he was posing for sympathy. He didn't care, this time, what she thought. Nothing mattered.

The satin-soft fingers rested on his arm again, and there was comfort in her very tones:

"Syd, *I* don't think you're shabby or tongue-tied, or — or — anything but awfully nice. If Ed were half the man you are, I'd be so proud of him that I shouldn't know what to do. Maud can't be really worth winning or she never would have jilted you for Ward Collins."

Syd took from his pocket two card photos and held them before her eyes — Ward's and his own.

"Look on this picture and then on that," he said scornfully. "You can see at a glance which a girl would be likely to choose."

"His picture is certainly handsome," said Lele; "and yours doesn't do you justice at all. Nearly all the beauty you have lies in that of expression. It is when you smile and your eyes light up that you look your best. If you had kept a smiling face, you never would have been jilted. Let me have the pictures, Syd."

"No; I keep them as a panacea for vanity. When I imagine anybody liking me better than Ward, I take out these old photos, and one glance satisfies me. I've looked at them a thousand times, I suppose."

"The cure doesn't appear to be permanent," said Lele, mischievously. "Give them to me and I'll warrant you'll have a better opinion of yourself."

Syd put the photos in his pocket and opened the gate for her to pass.

"It's getting too damp for you up here," he said. "See how wet the grass is."

"I want those pictures first."

"You can't have them, Lele."

"I won't stir one inch till I get them," said Lele, displaying astonishing obstinacy.

"Lele! how can you ask such a thing?" He was half laughing, half angry.

"Syd! how can you refuse me the only favor I've asked of you since I've been here?" aggrieved. "I don't mind going to bed hungry, or any such minor inconvenience; but if you refuse me those pictures I'll never forgive you."

He looked at her indecisively a moment, then said: "You can't have them."

"All right, sir. I know what you mean when you talk about kindness, and apologize for other people. I do indeed!"

Syd stopped her as she was passing him and said with a smile:

"Well, here they are. What use can you possibly make of them?"

"Keep you from looking at them," said Lele, slipping her hand through his arm. "I prophesy your self-esteem will develop from this time forth. And now, Syd, be a good boy. When you can be so thoroughly companionable you ought to exert yourself a little to amuse me while I'm here."

"You will be in no lack of amusement after this. Ward will keep you so well entertained that you will soon cease to care *how* I look."

"I don't care if he never comes here," said Lele. "He's nothing to me, Syd — just nothing."

Syd's heart leaped. He would have been more than human, perhaps, to resist the temptation to clasp in his the little hand that lay on his arm.

"I don't want him to come here and make my visit doubly disagreeable to the rest of you," she went on.

"*Doubly* disagreeable?" echoed Syd.

"You're not going to act so — so"—

"Unbrotherlike."

"That's just it. We're to be confidants, aren't we?"

"You can trust me with anything. I don't tell much about myself, Lele; never did. This evening was an exception."

They were at the gate, now, that led to the lawn and it had grown suddenly dark; there were thousands of fireflies in the shrubbery, and the stars were kindling. The lamps were not yet lighted in the house.

"I don't feel quite so homesick to-night," she said,

naively. "I'm getting accustomed to farm life, and it doesn't seem so lonely."

"Poor child! You've been having such a dreary time of it so far."

"It was only for a day or two, and I'm sure to have a good time once you all get to know me."

"I'm afraid we're such a dreary set, Lele"—

"Now, don't. I'll not find any happiness in cultivating Bethany Ridge, but I do so *long* to have my brothers and sisters love me."

"I don't think you'll have a great while to wait," said Syd, smiling. "Your victories in that line are very sure."

"Thank you, Syd. It does me good to hear you say it. And on your side — confess that you feel happier than you did an hour or two ago."

"I don't know but I do," Syd admitted. "I felt in need of cheering up when I came out, I do assure you. I was just like an old silk hat that somebody had stepped on and crushed all out of shape, and brushed the wrong way. But you've made me feel like — *folks.*"

"Good! I want you to feel like folks!" said Lele, merrily.

"Come into the dining-room and have lunch," said Syd, as they ascended the veranda steps.

* * * * * *

Lunch was over, and Lele was in the sitting-room chatting with her father and the children. Syd

remained outside a while smoking a cigar in the deepening dusk, and then, as if drawn by magnetism, wandered off across the fields in the direction of the St. John farmhouse. The front part of the house seemed deserted; there was no light in the parlor, and Syd knew Maud was away somewhere. When he got past the house a little he looked back and saw a light streaming from the open kitchen door. The family were decorously seated at their Sabbath cold lunch. There was no ringing laughter as when Maud was present. Kitty's little phiz appeared at the board beside her elderly parents. Morris was absent. He was probably now casting a shadow on Trixie Collins' parlor blind. Syd walked on. Maud would perhaps return shortly. If she did, he wanted to see her.

Presently he saw a one-horse buggy coming up the hill just ahead of him. Even in the dusk he could recognize Keith Hubbard's dappled gray, not so much by its color as by its size and gait. He stood back against the stone wall in the shadow of some pawpaw bushes to let them pass, for the road here was steep and narrow. The buggy-top was laid back and two people were in it — Maud and Keith. He recognized them by their voices, as they came up, though he could not distinguish their words. And his heart sank. He could not see Maud this evening, or any other evening, probably. Keith Hubbard was an ever-welcome guest there when Ward was in disfavor.

Syd's eyes were by this time so accustomed to the gloom that he could discern near objects quite well,

THE ROAD BELOW ST. JOHN'S AT TWILIGHT

though there was but a dim glow of starlight. Keith's arm was around Maud, who held the lines in her little gloved hands. Syd heard him say:

"Just one kiss, dearest."

"Now, Keith, you'll tell!"

"Maud, I swear I won't."

"Well — only *one*, mind!"

Syd waited to hear no more. But in hurriedly descending the bank he slipped and fell against the buggy wheels, which nearly ran over him. It was a moment or two before he could regain his feet.

"Oh, what is that dreadful creature?" cried Maud, appealing to Keith, whose horse had taken fright. Maud had dropped the lines and was about to faint outright when the buggy ran up against the bank and upset, throwing both out. Syd, as the promoter of the catastrophe, did what penance he could by catching the frightened horse and righting the buggy. Keith was slightly hurt; Maud not at all. But nothing could induce her to get into the buggy again. They were but a short distance from home, she said. If Syd would drive the horse, or lead it to her father's house, she and Keith would walk.

"I think I had better drive him myself," said Keith. "He knows my voice better."

"But, Keith, I'm afraid you'll get hurt," said Maud. "Syd can manage him."

"No matter if I *am* hurt!" thought Syd, tingling with indignation.

"You caused the accident, you know, and ought

to be willing to render some assistance," she added to Syd, with a voice of ruffled sweetness.

"The accident was caused mainly by Keith not having hold of the lines," replied Syd, shortly.

"You are *very* much mistaken, Mr. McKnight," said Maud, in a tone of ice mingled with salt. "I think it quite enough for you to cause our horse to upset the buggy and endanger both our lives, without making ungentlemanly insinuations."

"I beg your pardon for the insinuations, if I was mistaken. I haven't done anything ungentlemanly that I know of," Syd replied. "Still I am willing to drive the horse home if Keith is afraid of him."

"Afraid of my own horse!" exclaimed Keith, ruffled in his turn. He felt that his honor as a horseman was touched.

"Let him manage the horse, Keith," whispered Maud. "I want you to walk with me."

"Wouldn't you be willing to walk up the hill with Syd?"

"I wouldn't do it for the *world!*" said Maud, peevishly.

The next moment the fractious steed (with Syd grimly hanging on to the lines) was tearing up the hill as though pursued by furies. Things "looked shaky" for the driver's safety, but Syd rather enjoyed that part of the situation. A genuine Mazeppa flight would have been preferable to being snubbed any longer by his old sweetheart.

Fortunately, the harness held firm, and after a few minutes' run the gallant gray was all right.

Syd went on home after hitching him to the rack at St. John's without waiting to see Maud and Keith again. Every word of their whispered colloquy — indeed, every word that Maud had uttered — had fallen on his ears as bitter as gall-drops on the tongue.

Syd was thoroughly disenchanted at last; but he did not sleep any sooner or sounder that night for his freedom from thrall.

CHAPTER XIII.

Some Monday Morning Problems.

Monday morning dawned without a cloud. Lele arose early, and when she went downstairs found Syd seated on the top step of the veranda. He had done the feeding, and was waiting for breakfast, which was rather late. He greeted her with a smile that somehow softened and brightened the lines of his face into positive beauty. Lele began to realize that her stepbrother was, after all, a handsome fellow.

"Why so early?" he asked, making room for her at his side. "I thought city girls slept away all the freshness of the morning, and spent the rest of the day lolling in hammocks and easy-chairs."

"Not the up-to-date city girl," Lele replied, saucily. "She has given up the hammock and easy chair for the wheel, tennis and golf. Her days are as busy as once they were idle. And now she is a healthy, happy girl."

Syd thought of Jennie's narrow, drudging life in contrast, and was silent. Lele changed the subject.

"Syd, I feel that there is work for me to do here — for Ed, I mean," and her face suddenly clouded. "What is to become of that poor boy?"

"You mustn't worry about him, Lele; it won't help matters any. He has always been inclined to go to the bad. Some are, you know."

"Religion might make a useful man of him yet."

Syd repressed a smile.

"I never heard of religion putting elbow-grease into a man's arm; he's lazy, and, according to my creed, that is worse than being an infidel."

"With congenial work he might prove industrious."

"Possibly. But I haven't much faith in religion as a promoter of industry. I've seen too much of Jake Grimes' go-to-meetin' shiftlessness for that."

"Has the minister ever tried to reclaim him?"

"Ed, like some of the rest of us, hasn't much faith in the minister. His dullness is appalling, and he doesn't understand boys."

"Well, have you"—

"To be candid, Lele, I lost patience with Ed long ago, and I do not now pretend to have any influence over him."

"Is there anybody who has?"

"I'm afraid not."

Lele meditated with her chin resting on her clasped hands.

"Well," she said, finally, "I've thought a great deal about him ever since I came, and it seems to me the only thing we can do for him is to take him away from home, give him his chosen work, and place him where his mind and character will have every possible chance to improve."

"It would be worth trying, but every experiment costs money, and we have none."

"I have a plan, and if you will promise not to speak

of it, as I don't care to have more than one confidant, I will tell you what it is."

Syd gave his promise, and Lele resumed:

"Instead of just living on my income, as my aunt intended, I propose to apply for a school in my old home — St. Louis — and thus be able, if I am successful, to meet Ed's expenses while he is learning to be a machinist. I know a lady who will board us, I think. She is a friend of mine, and will be a great help to me in influencing Ed. She understands boys thoroughly, and has helped more than one toward a nobler life. It will give Ed a chance, at least, to make something of himself if there is anything in him."

"We would be better off without him, and it would, perhaps, be the best thing that could be done for him. But is it right for you to assume such responsibility, or for us to permit it?"

"I think it would be right — yes," said Lele, firmly.

"To teach school is no easy life for a woman, and, in addition, to have the care of such a fellow as Ed would take most of the brightness out of your life — particularly, if, as is likely, you failed, after all. I don't think you had better undertake it, Lele."

"My mind is made up now, and nothing can change it. The teachers will be employed very shortly, and I must send my letter of application to-day. I have some influential friends in the Board, and my guardian will help me if he sees that I am determined to teach. Then all that will be necessary will be father's consent to let Ed go. I have talked enough with my

brother to know that it will be a welcome change for him."

"It is very generous of you to form such a plan, and I"—

A cow, lately separated from her calf, was bellowing so loudly in the lane that Lele had to ask him to repeat the remainder of the sentence. The racket was simply deafening. And in the trees overhead hundreds of blackbirds added a chorus to the solo in the lane.

Syd ran to the fence and drove the cow away; then he beat two shingles together for several minutes and "cleared the aisles" in the tree-tops. Just as he turned to resume his conversation with Lele a red-faced Dutch* farmer appeared at the side gate with a gusty-looking frown on his fat countenance.

"Hello, Heldt!" said Syd.

"Hello, Seet," said Heldt, sulkily.

"What's to pay?" Syd asked.

"Blenty. In der name uff Himmel, vat you goin' to do mit dem stheers uff yourn, Seet? Py gracious, they been tearin' up shack mit my corn-field ag'in."

"They *have?* Confound it!"

"Vat you goin' to do aboud id?" Heldt persisted.

Syd's face took on an angry look that made Lele wonder how she could ever have thought him a handsome fellow. He made an attempt to reply, but his words were completely swallowed up in the obstreper-

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*Pennsylvania Dutch came originally from Holland, not Germany.

ous gobbling of a huge turkey which was strutting on the lawn.

"Vat you say?" shouted the Dutchman. "I give you ten tollars abiece for dem stheers an' say nuddings aboud damages."

Syd gave the gobbler a start with his straw hat that sent the noble bird wheeling around the corner of the house. Then he said something to Heldt that Lele could not hear.

"All ride, all ride!" said Heldt, and left in a huff.

"What did you say that made him so angry?" asked Lele. But the house dog and a ragged-looking cur that belonged to Heldt had taken up their masters' quarrel, and no conversation was possible for several minutes. Syd wasted no words in settling this "second-hand furse"; the cur was seen to run yelping down the lane a short time afterward on three legs, and one of Jennie's dahlia sticks was missing.

"I'm afraid you are acting a little imprudently in hurting his dog, Syd," Lele said, anxiously.

"Yes, I think myself that I let him off too easy. I ought to have broken his consarned neck. I'm satisfied he has killed five of our sheep within a week; and Heldt is so determined to make us sell the young cattle for half price that I think he turns them into the corn every night as a ruse to help pile up damages. Sometimes I think I shall end by murdering the Dutchman and his dog, too. Blast their hides!"

Lele reverted to Ed's case in a roundabout way;

but Syd's temper was ruffled for the day, and she saw that it was no time to urge Utopian schemes.

A third interruption put a stop to the conversation. Clem appeared to announce that the hogs were in the truck patch. Syd disappeared around the corner, closely followed by Clem, the frisky house cat and Clem's valiant yellow pup, while Lele, laughing at the picture they made, went out to the kitchen to see if she could render any assistance about breakfast, but had tact enough to discover very soon that Jennie regarded her room with more favor than her company, and withdrew. At breakfast Jean sat throughout the meal in sullen silence.

Ed was in his place again looking pretty well used up. His father asked him sharply where he had been, and he answered doggedly:

"Over at Redwood."

The other members of the family tacitly sanctioned the deception, not seeming willing to rouse his father's ire by stating that his graceless son had been "on a tear." The consequence would probably have been unpleasant.

After breakfast Lele made another effort to render herself useful in an unobtrusive way. She asked Cora if there was not some sewing she could do. Cora, who had long ago been nicknamed Do'no by Charlie, because she never knew anything until she had first appealed to Jen, sent Tude to the kitchen to inquire, and presently came the report:

"I told her what you said, Code, an' she said she guessed the sky'd fall if *you* touched a needle an' thread. You knowed that ever' blessed thing about the house from the roof to your stockin' toes needed patchin' an' yet you'd never lay scizzors to 'em if you thought the rag-man would carry you off."

"I didn't send for the whole Congressional Journal," said Cora, using one of her father's pet phrases. "Where's them check shirts of the boys — say?"

"She said you knowed they'd been in the press ever since we sold Blue Belle's calf and put the money into check an' breeches stuff for the boys, 'cause they was that ragged they looked like buzzards. An' her not bein' able fer six weeks to sew on 'em after she got 'em, on account o' the machine bein' all out o' whack."

"You find me the shirts, Cora, and I'll see if I can't make the machine work," said Lele.

Cora found the shirts — already cut out — and Lele made an attempt to "fix" the machine; but finding that she could do nothing with it, sewed by hand so diligently than when Ed came in to dinner she was putting the finishing stitches in a new shirt for him — evidently none too soon, for the one he wore was in slits.

"Seamstress, eh?" he said, in evident surprise, when she displayed her work.

"And all hand-made, too!" said Lele, triumphantly. "The machine won't work, Ed. Come and see what ails it."

"Didn't know there was anything the matter," muttered Ed.

"It's been out of whack for six blessed weeks," said Cora, yawning and rocking. "Jen told you about it, Ed, an' you got as mad as hops, an' said it might go to — I don't know where —'fore you'd touch it. An' Jen said after that if it stood there till the last one of you boys went to rags an' had to take to the woods she'd never say 'beans' to *you* about fixin' that machine again. She'd denied herself a new lawn dress to buy the check, too."

"If she hadn't been so d—d smart I'd have fixed it long ago," said Ed, examining the machine. "Excuse cussin', Lele," he added.

Lele sighed and said nothing. Ed would much have preferred a lecture.

It happened that the machine was not so badly out of order, after all. A little knowledge of machinery was all that was required to set it right, and by the time dinner was announced every thing was in complete running order again. Better still, Ed had donned his new shirt and his face wore a more cheerful look than she had yet seen on it. He was not such a bad-looking fellow when in a good humor. Lele, for the first time, discovered that his eyes were really good.

"You love machinery, don't you, Ed?" she said to him as she walked out to the gate with him after dinner.

"Yes, Lele, I do. An' it's the only thing, by jingo, that I ever *did* love. Much good it does."

"The advantage of being a man is that you can choose your work," said Lele, tentatively.

"Just about as much as this yaller dog of Clem's can choose his home," said Ed, grimly. "We've each got our places picked out for us, an' we've got to stay in 'em whether or no. *Darn* mine, I say!"

"I don't think that's the way Lincoln regarded rail-splitting," said Lele. "I think, though he was just aching to do very different work, he resolved so long as rail-splitting was his occupation to make the very best ones he could."

"Yes, but he was Abe Lincoln, all the same, an' I'm only — Ed Fairfax."

"As souls are rated, Ed Fairfax's place in the world is just as important as the Czar of Russia's. No man can carry the honors of this world into the next."

"We don't know anything certain about the next," said Ed. "But we know that this world is just a walkover for some people, and an almighty tough scramble for the rest of us."

"Yes, I know, a good many have felt the same. But remember, Ed, there's time enough to wait for all good things except character. That won't wait. Oh, Ed, don't you see that there is no grander resolve for a boy to make than this: 'Let me first of all be a *man*, and a good one'?"

"If the very devil was not in this old farm life for me, I'd try harder," said Ed, dejectedly; "but" — he shook his head.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mr. Fairfax's Views on Boys.

"Out of clothes, out of countenance; out of countenance, out of wit."—Ben Jonson.

After thinking a great deal upon the subject of Ed's future, Lele had decided upon what she deemed the best course of action for him. In pursuance of the plan mentioned to Syd that morning, she had written two letters, which must be mailed before evening, if ever: one to her guardian, fully explaining her reasons for wishing to become a teacher, and asking him to present her inclosed letter of application to the Board of Education. The other she sent to her friend, Mrs. Raymond, asking board for herself and Ed if she secured the coveted position. She had planned an after-dinner talk with her father, when even the most unreasonable men are supposed to be in a mood for granting favors. All she required was his consent to allow Ed to leave home. She felt sure that she could make him see the matter, finally, in the same light she did. After that there would be time to mail the letters.

But Mr. Fairfax, on that particular day, did not return to dinner. Monday, being washday, was not infrequently the most unpleasant day in the week at Fairfax farm; and Omar Fairfax was not to be excelled for skill in eluding the disagreeable. Lele had not

counted on this; still, since the time for action was so limited, she dared not wait. Another day would probably be too late to get her application in before the Board met. She took the first opportunity to send her letters to the postoffice, which chanced to be Ward Collins. He was issuing invitations to a party, and was to take in the postoffice *en route*.

Jennie happened to be on the veranda with Lele when he came, and, rather to the latter's surprise, she met him cordially. Ward, when asking Lele for her company to the party, out of politeness included Jennie also. She hesitated to join them, well knowing that her conduct of late had not been such as to render her society agreeable to either of them.

Lele, remembering her promise to Syd on the previous evening, had intended to decline going, but saw at once that it was a golden opportunity for winning the wayward girl by giving her a longed-for pleasure.

"Jennie," she said, impulsively, "let me accept for both. Mr. Collins, we accept with pleasure."

So it was settled, and Ward soon took his departure.

"I'll call at half-past five," he said at parting. "That will give us time enough to drive around by the bluff and still have an hour's daylight for croquet. It's lovely around the bluff by moonlight, isn't it, Jennie?"

"I never saw it by moonlight that I can remember," said Jennie, whose moonlight drives had been few indeed.

She went upstairs the moment Ward left, and Lele

was once more thrown upon her own resources for entertainment. As she sat sewing on the veranda, she smiled half sadly as she thought of her step-sister's neglect.

"And yet I think there is some good in the girl, if I can ever find it," she reflected.

Jennie, meanwhile, was sitting on the edge of the bed in her dingy room, pondering over Ward's motive in coming here, and including her, for the first time for many months, in an invitation to a party. That it was a bad motive she had no doubt. It was at least one that would increase the Fairfax woes if it depressed Jennie. It certainly did not raise her spirits much when she came to look at the matter from all sides. Dress was, of course, to be considered first, the bare thought of which was to Jennie like the blowing of the east wind in a time of drought.

Jennie's wardrobe was of the slenderest. Two dresses composed the stock available for company attire, the despised lawn and her faded old alpaca. She took them both out of the press, brushed them carefully, and tried in various ways to freshen them up, so that one might appear presentable enough to wear. But with her best efforts they both looked shabby enough; not so bad here, though, where everything looked dingy and out of date, as they would when seen in Collins's parlor, beside the other girls' pretty new dresses.

Jennie wondered if a girl was ever so tried with shabby old belongings as she was. Her hat she felt

was a fright. Charlie and even Syd had remarked upon its unbecomingness, and boys are very apt to be the best judges of such things. Her gloves were rubbed and split out at the fingers, her shoes not fit to be seen. The rest of the family were as badly off as herself, except Mr. Fairfax, who, being so much in the public eye, had to dress. His children, being obscure country people, *had* to keep the interest on the mortgage paid up, and that did not leave much margin for fashionable clothes. The father, moreover, was too busy looking after the welfare of that needy giant, the Public, to think of so small a matter as the wardrobe of his family. If he spoke of it at all, it was to condemn Jennie for having so little skill with her needle. Jennie's retort upon one occasion had effectually silenced him for a time.

"Can I make *goods?*" she had asked, passionately.

As Jennie sat there meditating upon the hopelessness of either "rig" as an evening dress, she looked back over the arid desert of the last two years, which should have been the happiest years of her girlhood had her mother lived and monetary matters prospered — years that had been just *crammed* with moonlight drives and sleighrides and parties for Trix and Maud. How bitter to her was the contrast between their lives and hers! Often she had cried herself to sleep when there was a party to which she was not invited, or could not attend for lack of company. And now that she was invited, and had a way to go, to think of being kept at home by her need of decent clothes!

Jennie, moreover, had been Ward's sweetheart in their childhood days. Not until she was old enough to put on long dresses and had been forced to wear such shabby ones had the Beau Brummel of the Ridge deserted her for Maud and a dozen other well-dressed girls.

"It gives me the lockjaw to see Jinks in that old alpaca," was his only excuse. "I couldn't talk to her if I tried."

On his way home that afternoon he prayed to his god, Eros — Ward was an unconscious idolater — that Jen's hopeless party dresses might in some manner be rendered *hors du combat* before the party came off.

"I don't want to haul either one of 'em in my buggy," he devoutly added.

Jennie, while helpless, felt instinctively that her mode of dress had cost her a very handsome lover. And Jen worshiped beauty. It was but another drop in her cup of bitterness that the only man who had ever tried to win her for a wife had been the champion ugly man of the neighborhood,— a bald-headed, broken-nosed widower,— who had been her pet aversion all her life. It did not afford much balm for her wounded pride to know that her lack of style was one thing that had attracted to her side this economical admirer.

"Jinny'll never break up no man with her extravagance," Mr. Markley had remarked at the Ridge one day before services, when the farmers were holding a conference on cut-worms and hard times generally. Charlie, who had overheard him, had quoted this so

often, and in so many different keys, that Jennie wondered sometimes how she would *live* and keep her senses until he exchanged it for some new mode of torture.

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Mr. Fairfax came home to supper. After the meal was over, Lele went into the garden to have a chat with this excellent gentleman, who, minus his coat, but plus vest, cuffs, a fashionable hat, and a laundried collar that sawed his chin, had decided to hoe a few weeds, but abandoned the uncongenial work with great cheerfulness as soon as his daughter joined him. Mr. Fairfax, like too many of us, never could talk and work at the same time.

"Oh, don't let me interrupt," pleaded Lele. "I can talk while you work."

"No matter; I can make but little headway, the weeds have got such a start," said Mr. Fairfax, glancing about him impatiently. "This looks bad, Lelia, to see things in the vegetable garden in such shape. But that's the way my boys do. Syd will be busy with the wheat — what with hauling, threshing and exchanging work — for the next month, I'll wager, and by that time all hope of a profitable garden will be blasted. The weeds will be taller than the picket fence."

"It would take one man most of the time to care for it," said Lele.

"I might do it myself if I were at home. But I'm away half my time. If the girls hoed more in the

garden and mowed less on the lawn, it would really be more profitable. Jennie has been boiling ever since the horses got into her flower beds the other night. Fussing over the lawn is ruining her temper. I wish Syd would plough it all up and put it in tobacco. And half the trees might be cut down for firewood. But Syd and Jennie both have the crankiest notions! For one thing, they will have the veranda and chimneys loaded with vines. They're nothing but snake harbors."

"Have you ever found any snakes in them?' asked Lele.

Mr. Fairfax struck an attitude and was about to begin a dissertation on reptiles, he being local authority on that rather "crawly" subject. Lele saw that her only chance for being heard was to ignore her own question and speak first.

"Papa," she began, hurriedly, "I was so sorry that you did not come home to dinner. Let me tell you what I have ventured to do. I do so *hope* you will not disapprove." And she told him at once just what she had done. Mr. Fairfax dropped the hoe as if paralyzed.

"Crack-brained girl that you are!" he cried. "Would you send the boy straight to perdition?"

"Rather I would try to help him attain a useful manhood," said Lele, much hurt.

"Haven't I forbidden you to mention machinery to him again?"

"I could not believe you really meant it."

"Foolish, foolish girl!" muttered Mr. Fairfax.

"You will not allow me even to speak to Ed on the subject, even if I get the school?" questioned Lele.

"If you have any respect for my wishes, no, emphatically *no!*"

"But wouldn't it be better to encourage him in some honorable occupation that he likes, than compel him to stay on the farm until he gets desperate and runs away?"

"Pooh! there's no danger of *his* running away."

"He told me he would not stay here another year."

"And Syd said the same thing at his age. Now you'll not find a steadier worker than that same Syd. At eighteen he got restless and dissatisfied; wasn't making any headway, he said; wanted to teach school, go to college, be a lawyer, doctor, or something. Farm life was too slow, too plodding, too confining; felt that he had faculties that were rusting out here, etc. Fiddlesticks! Suppose I'd gone to the expense of sending him to college; the farm would have gone under the hammer for lack of help to carry it on, and Syd would to-day have been sitting in some dingy law office waiting for clients and gnawing crusts. Ed likes to hear himself talk; but barking dogs seldom bite, you know. All he wants is to have that wheel nonsense taken out of his head, as the lawyer tomfoolery was out of Syd's, and he'll be all right."

"But, father, you ought to consider the difference in the two boys. Syd's character is totally unlike Ed's. What would build up one might destroy the other.

Parents surely ought to consider the tastes of their children in assigning them life occupations. A man can only work cheerfully when his heart is in his work, and I am sure Ed's heart is not in farm work."

"Well, if he had some of the laziness taken out of him, his heart *would* be in the work," said Mr. Fairfax, irritably.

"Father, do *you* like farm work?"

"I don't follow the plow any more myself. I'm too old now." (Mr. Fairfax was fifty.) "And besides it takes one to manage while others work. Furthermore, I have so much business to transact for others, and so much to see to, that I can scarcely find an hour to call my own. There's a man looking for me now — something about the new pike, I suppose, or maybe the bridge, or a subpœna. I must find out what he wants. If I'm called away from home — as is likely — there's not a day passes that I'm not wanted somewhere — remember, not a word to Ed about this new project of yours. It would be a foolish step for you to take, in any event. Better stay with the Carpenters and enjoy yourself."

"Enjoy myself while Ed's life is being spoiled!" exclaimed Lele. And her eyes filled with tears.

"Tut, tut! No use to worry about him. I know all about boys, and you don't. Let them see that they've got to toe the line, and *they toe it!* Look what I've saved Syd from. And the same rule works well with girls. Think of Jennie strolling over the country with some low comedy company! Instead, she's in a

respectable home, likely to marry, one of these days, a man who has a good home to offer her. Depend upon it, Lele, Ed wants nothing so much as a damper on this wheel craze. A little injudicious encouragement has spoiled many a man for life."

Lele wondered, as she left him, whose encouragement had spoiled her father. Somebody's evidently had!

Oh, for some wise, sympathizing friend to appeal to in her perplexity!

When the boys came in for supper, Lele, who was sitting on the back porch caressing some cunning, velvety balls of kittens which Tude had just placed in her lap, noticed that they all looked tired and jaded. Your farmer in harvest, far from looking fat and hearty on the bountiful harvest fare, looks lantern-jawed and hollow-eyed. And no wonder. Constant heavy work from 3 A. M. till 9 P. M. is enough to break any man down. The two older ones went into the house through the kitchen as though wishing to avoid her, but Clem and Charlie dropped down on the grass at her feet to look at the kittens.

"What have you boys been doing since dinner?" asked Lele, pulling Clem's ear by way of a friendly overture.

("She forgets how mean we treated her about the presents," thought Clem, and felt disposed to drop a penitential kiss upon her white fingers.)

"Tryin' to put Hubbard's cows out o' the corn," Charlie was replying. "They'd been in all morning,

takin' it row at a time. We never *did* have any real nice corn that some dratted beast didn't make way with. I reckon they'd finished it if Ward Collins hadn't seen 'em an' stopped to tell us as he came by. He was tellin' the boys somethin' about a party somewhere, but I don't b'lieve Syd ever waited to see where it was to be, he was that mad about the cattle. Where is the party, Lele?"

"At Mr. Collins's."

"Well, I'll bet Syd an' Ed don't go. They never invite Ed, 'cause Miss Trix is too good to speak to him. She says no drunken gambler shall enter her parlor; for all, Morris St. John takes a glass now an' then, but she don't seem to know that."

"Does Ed really gamble?"

"He plays 'keerds' out in the barn all night sometimes, an' down to the station, too; he loses money at it, or would if he had any *to* lose. Father's got a notice out that he won't pay any of his debts."

"Charlie, tell me, has Ed been"—she hesitated—"intoxicated often?"

"He's been drunk lots of times this spring, but father doesn't know it. He always sobers up, you see, before the ole man gets back. He'd have skinned him alive if he'd been here Saturday night," he added, in a guarded undertone.

"You'd better keep dark," warned Clem. "Ed's in a high ole temper this evening. Him an' Syd's both mad ez hornets."

"Quarreling again!" sighed Lele.

"Syd didn't say much, but I c'd see he hed all he c'd do to hold his tongue," said Clem. "Ed got mad at the cattle first, an' then him an' Syd had a scrap, an' the cuss words flew like sut when the chimbley's afire."

"Ain't it awful?" said Tude. "He'll go to the bad place, sure."

"Syd can't bear t' be swore at," Clem went on. "It just raises his dander, an' makes him fly all to pieces. I never knowed anybody's stock get into our fields that them two didn't have a racket 'fore we got 'em finally boosted, did you, Charlie?"

"Har'ly ever. But this morning Syd seemed bound not to jaw Ed, though I c'd see he wanted to whip the earth with him. If I'd ben Syd I'd have knocked him down with a rock."

"Oh, Charlie!"

"Sometimes I wish Ed would go 'long off; he keeps us all riled till we can't see straight."

"Doesn't Syd 'rile' you, too?"

"No, Lele. To be sure, he makes us work like clinkers, an' won't stan' no foolishness. But he tries to do right, an' he wants things done in good shape. If it wasn't for him, everything about this ranch would go to sticks. But I think we'd get along better if we didn't have to drive stock so much. The fences are rotten as pears, an' on an average of five times a week we've got to have a siege of fence-fixin' an' runnin' stock helter-skelter, over hills an' hollers, through plowed ground, briar patches an' what not, till we're

mad at each other an' everything else. No wonder we're so ragged," he added, displaying a tattered sleeve. "If we dressed in buckskin, we couldn't keep in clothes, an' Jen bawls pretty near every ironin' day 'cause there's such a jolly lot of things to patch."

"The fences *must* be bad!"

"Bad! They're nothin' much but brush heaps. If pap had built good fences when he had money, instead o' speculatin' it away, we'd be better off. But he never sees to anything except public business. Private business is too small for him. He's always sayin' what a fine occupation farmin' is. I guess if he'd run hogs an' cattle as much as the rest of us, he'd change his mind."

"Charlie, I may be mistaken, but I'm afraid you children have gotten into the habit of criticising other members of the family who are absent. Isn't it a little unkind? It seems to me that it destroys confidence in families, and makes each one's ears begin to burn as soon as he is out of sight of the others. If charity begins at home, why not begin by being charitable to each other's faults? Could any of us be happy if we knew that we were being found fault with by all the rest of the family every time our backs were turned?"

The children hung their heads guiltily.

"Happiness," she resumed, in her softest voice, "is the best thing we can possess in this world, and even the smallest child soon learns that no one can be happy without the love and confidence of its nearest relatives. Fault-finding is one of the surest ways of making

our dearest friends miserable. Take poor Ed, for instance"—

"People who don't know anything about bears think bears make nice pets," interrupted Charlie.

"Well, they do in time," said Lele, smiling, "if they are properly trained, you know. I'd have been a perfect little wildcat, myself, if I'd been permitted to grow up untrained."

"I'll bet you never had anything to make you mad in your life," retorted Charlie, adding slyly, "till you came here!"

"You ought to drive sheep an' hogs once," added Clem, with conviction.

"I know it must be trying. I sympathize with you truly, and if I ever have it in my power, I shall rebuild the fences just to give you boys a season of peace and quiet. I'm as sorry for you as I can be."

Lele's sympathy was very taking. The boys drew nearer; her presence did them good. Charlie had thought when she began her little sermon on fault-finding that he would slip a cricket down the back of her neck to see if she would "take on" as Jen did when her sermons were similarly interrupted. But now he resolved to postpone it. Lele was such a sweet girl; it would be a mean shame to aggravate her with crickets after all she had been through here!

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"I'll tell you what, I *like* that girl!" exclaimed Clem, as he climbed into bed that night. "She's real pleasant, an' her laugh makes you kind of feel good.

I wish Jin was more like her. Confound Jin! It's got so here lately it's har'ly safe to walk past her, fear she'll give you a whack, unbeknownst. I actually wouldn't put it much a-past her to come up here after we're asleep an' give us a clubbin' for some of our misdemeanors."

"'Sphyxia would get the worst end o' the bargain if she tried clubbin' me unbeknownst," said Charlie, drumming on the headboard. "I say, Clem, I do wonder if Lele's ever seen the ghost yet."

"I d'know." Clem shut his eyes, because he fancied he saw a light spot shining in the darkness. "S'pose Jen 'd care if she did?"

"No; I'll be bound she wouldn't. Jen's that hard-hearted she wouldn't care if it scared her to death."

"It's mean of her to put Lele in the spare room, ain't it?"

"Mean ez dirt, an' I'll tell Jin so the next time she turns her lip on me. I wish sometimes she'd get married 'fore she gits so ill there's no livin' with her."

"Don't you pity her husband, though?"

"Not if she gets ole Markley, for he thrashed me once for stealin' his pears. I've been tryin' to get even with him ever since, an' I guess I'll not be able to do better than to get up a match between him an' Jen. Won't his ears ring, though!"

"I'll bet she'll be an ole maid."

"You'll have to take care of her, then, when you marry. She'll be apt to make her home with you, Clem."

"I'll *not!*" cried Clem, stoutly. "You can take care of her your own self."

"It will be just like you an' Cora to take her, for neither of you have the spunk of a chicken-creeper."

"I'll show you whether I have the spunk of a chicken-creeper!" said Clem, angrily; and he kicked his brother out of bed.

CHAPTER XV.

The Fairy Godmother.

On the morning of the party, Lele, seeing that the younger girls were disposed to be more friendly, called them into her room to give them some of the clothing which she had outgrown, and had packed for her younger sisters. Among them was a white India linen adorned with pale blue ribbons, and a silver gray cashmere that a very little altering would transform into stylish suits for Cora. The two girls, utterly forgetful of Jennie and wild with delight, instantly pulled off their old faded calico dresses and shabby shoes and stocking to try on those Lele had brought. There were several beautiful dresses that were not a bad fit for Tude, nor so badly out of date that a little remodeling would not render quite presentable.

"Oh, dear! I never expected to have so pretty a dress as this," sighed Cora, gazing rapturously in the glass after donning the gray cashmere. "It fits me as well as if it had been made for me, and, I declare, it's prettier than Sue Hubbard's new summer silk."

"It's very becoming, Cora, or will be when I touch it up a little," said Lele. "I hope you'll like it."

"Oh, I'll like it," said Cora, in her soft, easy way. "It suits me down to the ground. May I go show it to Jin?"

"You'd better not. She'll skin you if you do," warned Tude. "You know what she said."

Cora raised her eyebrows and pursed up her lips thoughtfully.

"It would make her mad, I guess, like the time you said all the rest but her were to come up after our presents. She was hoppin', I tell you! But I do *hope* she won't make me give this back, for I need a new dress *so much*. I wish it was longer, for then Jen might have it herself. She needs it awful bad."

"She won't let you keep it, I know," sighed Tude. "Just think, Code, how her old lawn, or the alpaca, either, would look by that rich, gray dress!"

"It's cashmere, too," Cora added, as though that made the case hopeless, "just like Sue Hubbard's spring dress." (Sue was just Cora's age and her criterion in everything. All through childhood they had been chums, but of late they had been drifting apart, just as Trix and Jennie had done when the difference in their fortunes began to be manifested in "clothes and beaux.") "Jen's been nearly crazy for a cashmere ever so long. But none of us ever had one — not even mamma. Jen's alpaca was made out of an old one. Don't you think, Lele, that this dress could be let down some way, so she could wear it? We need never let her know that I tried it on first."

"What is she going to wear to-night?" asked Lele.

"Her alpaca, I'xpect. I wanted her to press off the lawn and wear it; but she says it looks, if anything, worse than the other, and I don't know but it does.

Them's the only two dresses she has fit to wear away from home."

Lele turned abruptly away and began to rummage through the closet. Her cheeks were flushed, a lump was in her throat; she could hardly keep from crying.

Think of it! Only two dresses for company; one of them a cheap lawn, and the other a rusty alpaca made out of an old one. What would Lele feel like if her wardrobe were as skimpy as that? Involuntarily, she took down a rich, black etamine, made early in the spring, and for some reason never worn but once. This would suit Jennie, and if she would accept it, she should have it for her own. Lele felt pretty sure that they were near enough of one size to insure that it would fit her. It was only one out of an abundant wardrobe, for Lele had never known what it was to be denied a new dress whenever she wanted one. In that respect her aunt had been the soul of liberality. In fact, nothing was too good for her pretty niece. Had Lele demanded diamonds, she would have tried to gratify her.

"I wonder if Jennie would accept this," Lele said.

"What! that lovely dress!" exclaimed Cora, in amazement. "You must be rich if you can afford to give *that* away."

"No, I'm not rich; but I have plenty of clothes, and it isn't *right* that I should have so many more than Jennie."

"Jen never *dreamed* of anything so swell," sighed Cora, and suddenly caught her breath as she added:

"Oh, I'd forgot her dreadful crackled shoes, an' that hat of hers. Lele, don't offer it to her. I'm sure she'd never put it on till she can get somethin' to correspond with it."

"I'll see to that, of course," said Lele.

She added to the dress a hat, a collar, handkerchief, kid gloves, a ribbon and a pair of slippers dainty enough for Cinderella, except in size; wrote on a card, "Jennie, from Lele," pinned it on, and bade her sisters carry the whole costume to Jennie's room and say that Lele had sent her love and begged that she would accept it all as a token of sisterly regard.

"We'll not tell her what it is," said Tude, as Cora carefully arranged the costume on Jennie's bed. "We'll tell her there's something on her bed, an' see her bounce up-stairs with the broom to drive it out, for she'll be certain it's the cat."

Cora, upon mature reflection, thought it quite too much trouble to go down-stairs and come up again to see the effect of the surprise, but hid in Syd's bedroom opposite and listened for Jennie, who, true to Tude's prediction, came up prepared to do brilliant execution with the broom, but stopped short and stood rigid as though paralyzed by the sight of the dress. The broom slipped from her belligerent grasp and fell to the floor as she picked up Lele's card and read it.

Cora and Tude rushed in, bursting with laughter, and delivered Lele's sisterly message. Jennie did not say a word in reply; she couldn't. Hastily putting them both out of the room, she locked the door,

threw herself down on Tude's bed, and burst into a passion of tears.

The two girls went down-stairs with a disappointed air.

"Jen's so everlastin' *queer*," said Cora. "You never know whether she's goin' to go into hysterics or blow you sky high. I wish she was more like other girls."

"An' what we're to tell Lele — when she was so clever with her presents — I can't say," mused Tude. "Anybody that couldn't say 'thankee' for that rich dress!"

As Jean grew calmer, her first impulse was to thank Lele, humbly ask her forgiveness, and strive to make the rest of her visit as pleasant as possible. It was heaping coals of fire on her head with a vengeance for Lele, whom she had treated so unkindly, to make her a present of the very things she needed most, and at a time when it seemed out of the question for her to refuse. Jennie fairly writhed with shame when she thought of her abominable rudeness so nobly requited. And yet so strong is habit, she found that she could not put her resolve into execution.

She thought about it all day, one minute willing to keep the gift and make the bitter and humiliating confession; the next, resolved to give the whole outfit back and go on as she had been doing.

"I don't really want her here under any consideration," was the cry of jealous pain. "I want to drive her away where I can never be tormented by the sight of her."

At last she resolved to wear the dress to the party — the temptation was irresistible when she found that everything, even to the shoes and gloves, fitted as if made for her — but not until time to dress for the party could she bring herself to address Lele on the subject — poor, disenchanted Lele, who in "the broad-minded, deep-hearted country" had so confidently looked "for broad, Christian charity, for simple, consistent, child-like faith in God and man."

"You are very kind to lend me the dress," she said; "I wouldn't wear one that wasn't mine on any account, only I don't want you to have to appear in such shabbily dressed company as I should otherwise be."

"I shall be very much hurt if you mention returning the dress or anything I sent with it," said Lele. "I want you to have it all for your very own, Jennie dear."

The girl's eyes filled with tears and she turned away without saying a word. Charlie, who was standing near, caught Lele by the arm, whispering dramatically —

"Lele, you've crossed the Rubicon an' squelched the enemy right in her own country. So help me gracious!"

Ed and Syd, very much to Lele's disappointment, obstinately refused to go to the party, though without assigning any particular reasons.

Jennie had four-o'clock supper in order that the evening work might all be done up before time to go, running herself nearly "off her feet" to get her

work in such a shape that she felt she could leave it. When she went up-stairs to dress she was tired enough to "sink in her tracks."

"What's the use to go, tired as I am," she thought, despondently. "I'll only be a wall-flower; Lele will get all the attention."

She put on the beautiful slippers and felt slightly refreshed.

"I guess I'll risk it," she thought. When her toilet was complete she felt like another girl.

"Jee-whizz! don't she loom!" cried Charlie, putting his head in at the half-open door. "Jen, you're no slouch — it's the way you comb your hair."

"Hold your tongue," said Jennie, less sharply than usual, however.

"There ain't no flies on *that* dress!" said Charlie, admiringly; "an', by gorry! that hat is all wool an' a yard wide, or I ain't here."

"Keep still, Charlie," said Jennie, with a start. She had heard a man's voice down-stairs.

"It ain't ole Markley's step you hear," said Charlie. "I say, Jen, I *would* give ole sheepy the go-by if I could do better. It would be worth while to set that cap at a handsomer man."

Lele, some time earlier, had gone down-stairs in a gauzy black dress that made her skin look like alabaster. She found Ed in the sitting room mending one of Tude's toys.

"What do *I* care for a party?" he growled, when she made a last effort to coax him to go. "I never

was at but two parties in my life, an' I thought if I got away from them without turnin' to stone or salt, I'd never go to another. Dryest places 't ever *I* was at."

"You ought to keep going, though," said Lele. "Parties are really the thing a young fellow of your age needs. They help you socially, and"—

"Well, if you want a society man, I'll cite you to pap," said Ed. "I shouldn't wonder a bit if he'd go if he could have half a chance."

"Seriously, Ed, I think it helps a boy in many ways to go to parties. For one thing, it places him in the society of good people and ought to give him a distaste for low characters. Being with nice girls is a great help to any young man."

"The 'nice girls' of Bethany Ridge wouldn't wipe their old shoes on me," said Ed, with a look of bitter humiliation, and hurried out of the room as though to avoid a painful discussion. Lele felt very sorry for Ed then. There were moments when he would gladly have "gone with the best" and turned his back on his low associates, but society had its foot on his neck. Like too many boys, he had lost his way, socially. Bethany society never dreamed of holding out a helping-hand to such as he. Alas, poor Ed!

Syd now came in from the sitting room, where he had been playing with Tude while Cora cleared away the supper dishes.

"You look nice in that thin, black dress, Lele," he

said. "Let me get some of those large, dark-red roses out by the gate to complete your toilette."

"No; I prefer honeysuckle blossoms," said Lele. "The red roses are for Jennie; they contrast with her dark beauty. For myself, I love the sweet honeysuckle best," and she buried her face in a great cluster of the fragrant blossoms.

"You can wear anything and still look — sweet," said Syd, trying the effect of both roses and honeysuckles; "but the roses are much the more 'fetching.'"

"No matter. I'm not expecting to do much in the fetching line to-night," said Lele, easily.

"I wonder why. You haven't an ornament of any description; and, candidly, I think I've seen you dress your hair more becomingly."

"I don't think any harm will be done by my Quaker-like appearance," said Lele, who had dressed with great plainness as a foil to Jen's splendid appearance. She wanted the unhappy girl for once to feel that she was not eclipsed in dress.

"I didn't want to go to the party with Ward and Jennie," Lele added; "for I really believe they would get on better without me."

"You must know that he only asked her on your account."

"And I don't care to have him come here on my account. I meant what I said to you about him Sunday evening, Syd."

"I don't hold you to any such bargain. I really wish you would keep on the good side of the Collinses, Lele. I can't, to save my life."

"Ward invited you to his party, and you ought to have gone."

"If you knew exactly how rude I was to him, you wouldn't wonder at me for staying at home."

"You were mad about the cattle, Charlie says. Suppose you come in and apologize."

"Nix."

"Please, Syd."

"Couldn't possibly retract."

"What did you say, you bad boy?"

"Can't say exactly. Just the sight of him driving over the country, with Venus and Di, inviting people to a party, while I was driving cattle, made me furious. I know I acted like a fool. But if I were to go to the gallows for it, I couldn't and wouldn't apologize. I don't blame Ward so much. He tried to treat me well, but he doesn't and can't know the effect his deuced gayety has on me."

Lele thought of Maud St. Johns, and wondered if he were still jealous.

"Syd," she asked, after a pause, "is your rudeness to Ward yesterday afternoon your only reason for wishing to remain at home to-night?"

"No; I'm afraid Maud will be there, and that Ward will show her some attention. Keep him with you, Lele. I may win Maud yet with such a powerful rival out of the way," jestingly.

Syd was fast getting over the gloom into which his interview with Keith and Maud had thrown him. He could even bring her name into the conversation, which for a few hours he felt that he could never do again. After all, Syd was glad he had taken the stroll past Maud's house on that particular evening. Where quinine is needed, magnesia and sugar never have proved efficacious.

Before Jennie came down Lele had time to talk over Syd's offense with young Collins, who answered impetuously at first, but soon was laughing and protesting that it was all right.

"It's just because I don't understand Syd any more," he said, frankly, "or else I used to impose on him shamefully. He used to pet me like a kitten, and I thought I knew every kink in his character. But his whole nature seemed to change as he grew into manhood; just as Jennie's"—

The door opened at this moment, and Jean, looking lovely in her "borrowed plumes," walked regally into the apartment, her head held as proudly as if the lovely hat she wore had been a diadem. Ward felt like rubbing his eyes.

"By Jove!" he thought, "*is* that Jen McKnight, or some young princess who has solicited the loan of her eyes? The rest of the personality is a stranger to me."

He had always thought her a dowdy-looking girl, for even in her school days she was never well dressed, though her lack of self-consciousness in those happy

days had shorn her commonplace garments of half their ugliness. Of late, Ward had considered her a perfectly hopeless "guy." But this evening Jennie McKnight looked as she had never looked in all her life, having all at once emerged into a charming womanhood, as surprising as it was dazzling. The scowls and frowns and brooding discontent had disappeared; to-night, freed from the baleful influence of the crackle-toed shoes, fearful-looking hat and faded alpaca, she looked a different being. *Now* she could smile, a rich color glowed in her cheeks, and under the long, fringed lashes the dark eyes shone like stars.

"A regular Cinderella transformed," thought Ward. "I suppose her step-sister is the sweet fairy who wrought the miracle. Poor Jen! I hope she'll marry a rich man, for she never *can* look well except in something handsome. I do wonder if that is the reason for her looking so sour and sulky of late. That old alpaca was enough to scare the crows. One really couldn't feel comfortable in the vicinity of such a rig, and as for offering to take her anywhere in it, I really hadn't the courage to do it. By Jove! it would have been easier to sink the Merrimac!"

The drive through the delicious evening air was a continuous pleasure; the view from the bluff charming, and the party a success. Everybody, for a wonder, treated Jennie with unusual consideration, though Maud once mortified her by praising her new dress with rather a knowing smile.

Jennie inwardly trembled with a fear that she would

next ask who made it and where she bought it; how much it cost a yard and whether it was all wool. Maud had a habit of quizzing sensitive people in this way, and hardly ever failed to draw out the information for the public that Jennie's shoes were two sizes larger than her own — Maud standing proudly on a Number 1. The smallest feet in the neighborhood were Maud's, as her waist was the slenderest, her tongue the liveliest, her satire most dreaded, her friendship most courted. But, fortunately, Maud even was lenient to-night. Lele was not overwhelmed with attention, nor was Jennie ignored. Even Ward was attentive to Jennie, and for once that young lady had what might fairly be considered "a good time."

Late in the evening, when Ward and Jennie happened to be alone together for a few moments, he said:

"I've wanted all evening to tell you how nice you look, Jinsey; but couldn't with Maud everlastingly at my elbow." (He and Maud had made up their late "tiff" to-night, thanks to Trix's clever maneuvering.)

"No wonder you noticed that I am better dressed than usual," said Jennie, sensitively. "I have Lele to thank for it, as I guess you know," she added.

"It's lovely of her to let you eclipse her."

"How?"

"You are ever so much the better dressed. And to-night you look lovely. You *must* marry rich, Jinsey, so you can wear diamonds and costly satins with sweeping trains."

"Nonsense!"

"I dreamed of you last night in a white silk dress made with a court train and with diamonds flashing in your hair. You were surrounded by admirers, but when I came up you turned your back on all of them and talked only to me."

"Thanks!" with nervous laughter. "Dreams always go by contraries, though, don't they?"

"You mean you would *not* have turned from the other fellows to me?"

"Oh, no! I meant — I don't ever expect to wear satin and diamonds, Ward."

"Yes, you will. It's decreed," said Ward, confidently. "You'd make an elegant widow, Jinsey. There's Mr. Markley — he'll drop off one of these days with apoplexy if he persists in wearing those dreadful high collars. I understand that he has sheep enough to buy his widow a coronet, and that you are his first choice."

Jean did not reply. The young people were leaving for home, and the conversation interrupted here, was not resumed. But Jean was sorry she had not set him right on the subject of Mr. Markley.

That night, as the two girls went up-stairs, after their return from the party, Jennie again offered to return the costume, which she still maintained was only borrowed "to keep Lele from being put out of countenance." Lele, however, positively refused to listen to such a proposition. But neither her generosity, nor the sisterly kindness and tact that had, throughout the

evening, done so much to insure her comfort, was powerful enough to exorcise the evil spirit that still held possession of poor Jen. Murmuring some broken words of gratitude, she paused irresolutely at her bedroom door, half willing to ask Lele to come in and share her room in peace, with no haunting fear of ghosts to disturb her dreams; but as Lele passed on, she did not recall her. Instead, she went in and locked the door. A chill seemed to settle on her spirits.

Cora, roused by the grating of the key in the lock, sat up drowsily.

"Oh, it's you, Jen," she said. "Do tell me who was at the party."

"Everybody," said Jennie, ambiguously, as she took off her hat and gloves before the little cracked glass.

"Was Sue Hubbard?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Jen! You're jokin'."

"Not a bit. Sue was there — in long dresses."

"I don't believe it!"

"And with her hair done up in the latest agony."

"Done *up*," echoed Cora, in tones of dejected amazement. "An' I'll bet," she added, as though nothing else would be incredible, "that she had a beau."

"She had," said Jennie, but with hesitancy.

"It wasn't Ol Stuart?"

"It was nobody else. You'd have thought they were engaged."

Cora drew the sheet up over her head, for there

were angry tears on her cheeks. Ol Stuart had seemed to like her the best last winter at school; but now that Sue was in long dresses and had her hair "done up," Cora saw that she was distanced.

"They might have invited me, too," she thought. resentfully; "but, after all, I couldn't have gone in either one of Lele's short dresses if Sue was in trails." She lay awake for hours devising some plan to hitch a "trail" to the gray cashmere. Jen, too, lay awake until morning, feeling truly miserable. Neither spoke to the other again.

CHAPTER XVI.

Real and Imaginary Haunts.

Maud St. John and Trixie Collins put their pretty heads together and made a party. The young people of the neighborhood were invited to play tennis at Maud's home.

"How many of those Fairfaxes have we got to expect?" asked Trixie, with a weary air; "the whole tribe make me tired. I wish, with papa, that they were in Texas and we had their farm. Syd was over the other day trying to get the note extended another year, but papa won't extend it, though he just put him off a while on some pretext. He says he wants to be sure of the interest money, for he expects to get the whole farm for the face of the note, at sheriff's sale."

"Wouldn't I have feathered my nest if I had taken Syd?" laughed Maud, softly. "Oh, Trix, did you hear about our adventure Sunday evening?"

"Not a word. Why didn't you tell me at the croquet party?"

"I wanted to tell you when we were alone, and I've made Keith promise not to tell. I want to see what Syd would make of it."

"Make of what?" Miss Trixie's penciled eyebrows

took on a slight frown. "What could he make of it?"

"It was the most absurd thing!" laughed Maud. "Keith and I were out driving until dark Sunday evening, and as we were coming up the hill beyond our house, something like a great dog or bear rolled and tumbled down the bank right against our buggy wheels, frightening Keith's horse nearly into a stampede. It did upset the buggy and both of us were thrown out. It was all Keith could do to prevent it from running away. He was hurt, too, and I was knocked silly with fright. What do you suppose the thing was that caused the trouble, and might have been the means of killing both of us? Why, Syd McKnight, to be sure. He had come over to call, I think, and seeing by the appearance of the house that I was gone, had walked on expressly to give us a fright."

"Maud, I really think you are mistaken. I never heard of Syd doing such a spiteful thing. He wouldn't be capable of it."

"But let me tell you what he did that confirms my suspicions. When we asked him to lead or drive the fractious horse up-hill, as Keith was hurt, he flew all to pieces and declared he wouldn't do a thing for us; said we wouldn't have been upset if Keith had had the lines, and all such stuff, showing that he is still abominally jealous."

"He had grounds, no doubt."

"Trixie, he did not. But I don't want his ill-will. I must somehow contrive to have him come to my party. He must accompany his step-sister."

"Ward will be certain to be her escort," said Trix, with a disturbed air. "He chatters about her until I am sick of the subject."

"That is just it, you see. He likes her." Maud made an impressive pause.

"He likes you far better if we could keep this Fairfax girl out of his sight. I might somehow induce him to bring Jen, though, if Lele had promised first to accompany Syd."

"Jen will do, I guess. She would give her eyes any day to be with Ward."

"Didn't Jinks look pretty the other night?" Trix remarked, almost involuntarily.

"She *did* look rather nice. Good thing, for we never could get Ward to accompany her in her old rig."

Maud wrote Syd a dear little note, perfumed and delicate and full of subtle flattery, conveyed in a few friendly sentences. She was sorry she had offended him Sunday evening, and wanted to apologize for insulting him by speaking as she did. She wanted him to come to her party, so she could talk it over, etc. She would expect him to bring Lele and Jen *without fail.*

She and Kitty called on Lele that afternoon, and Maud succeeded in making Lele believe that Jen's whole evening would be spoiled if she had to go with any one but Ward.

"I thought Mr. Collins was one of your admirers," said Lele.

"One of my particular friends, that is all," Maud replied.

* * * * * * *

Syd had been driving hogs out of the wheat-field, and was hot with rage and dripping with perspiration when one of the Grimes boys appeared with Maud's note.

Syd turned faint and sick when he saw the envelope, for he thought it was a notice that the mortgage was to be foreclosed. But the blood rushed back into his cheeks again when he caught sight of Maud's writing. He almost snatched it from the boy's hand.

"It don't need no answer, she said," observed the boy, and went off, looking back and grinning over his shoulder, while Syd leaned against a wheat shock and tore open the little missive. He felt dizzy somehow, and the lines swam zigzag before his eyes.

Once he would have devoured Maud's note as a famished man swallows food, reading it again and again that not a morsel of its tantalizing sweetness might escape him! But now visions of the real Maud, as she had appeared last Sunday evening, swam before the note and made her seem more crooked than the dancing lines. Had he not seen enough of her coquetry? He crumpled up the note and strode across the fields toward home, the light all gone from his face again. It angered even while it hurt him to think Maud would not leave him in peace; but must drag him back to make a tool of him in some less obvious,

but not less useful manner than driving home a dangerous horse.

Just before supper he came into the sitting room, where Lele was sewing, and she saw at a glance that something was wrong.

"Lele, I wish there were no such things in creation as parties," he burst out, throwing himself with an angry, impatient air into a large rocker opposite.

"Why, Syd?" Her tone, her glance, her very attitude of sweet repose partially tranquillized him.

"We are never invited to one that we don't have a fuss of some kind over it. Jen and I have quarreled over this one, and she is crying so she won't come to supper. It was my fault, entirely, this time," he added, despondently. "I'm more sorry than I can say."

"She will soon get over it," said Lele, tranquilly. It occurred to her that a few tears might soften Jennie's stony heart.

"No, she won't. Crying is a serious business with Jen. You will have to take her place at the table and pretend she is sick. Father wouldn't excuse her at all if he knew she was only mad. He is very firm in discipline, though he might as well not be for all the good it does."

"I'll take her place," said Lele, folding her sewing neatly and putting it away. "Was Jennie coaxing you to go to the party against your wishes?"

"Oh, no; quite the contrary. She thinks I would be better off at home."

"Too bad, when Miss St. John is so anxious to

have you accompany me, so Mr. Collins can bring Jen."

"Indeed!" Syd raised his eyebrows and gave Lele an odd glance. It was now perfectly plain that Maud was scheming to keep Ward and Lele apart. He was silent a moment, chafing with resentment against the world in general and Maud in particular. Then in a revulsion of feeling he resolved to accompany Lele.

"Would you mind going with me?" he asked simply.

"Mind? Why, I should like it," said Lele. "You *ought* to go, Syd."

"But if you go with me, you will have to walk," he answered, with a mortified consciousness of his poverty. All the young men on Bethany Ridge had buggies except himself. "It isn't very far across the field, but to avoid the wet grass we should have to walk clear around the road. You wouldn't enjoy that?"

Lele blushed vividly, and for a moment her sisterly frankness deserted her. Syd noted her hesitation, but misunderstood its cause, and his face clouded as he said:

"No, Lele, I can't go at all. Maud will find some other escort for you. I couldn't think of having you walk away over there."

"But, Syd — I will — I'd rather go with you," stammered Lele. "Stop, Syd," as he was going, "I don't mind walking — with you!"

"Yes, you do; and I can't go anyhow. You can

find another escort — one who is well enough off to possess a buggy. I'm not!"

* * * * * * *

Maud stopped on her return from issuing the invitations to see what had been decided as to Lele's escort, and finding that Syd was not going, she promised to send her brother after Lele. Then Ward was coaxed to "take pity on poor Jen."

The evening proved propitious for the party, and Lele enjoyed herself very much, though her thoughts kept wandering back to Syd, who was probably sitting alone on the veranda meditating on his poverty-stricken, buggyless condition.

Ward was the life and soul of the party, and kept everybody in a whirl of gayety during the early part of the evening. Later he developed a propensity for tête-à-tête nonsense that considerably disturbed Maud. With all her clever maneuvering, she could not constantly keep him in sight.

Presently Lele and Ward found themselves the only occupants of the sitting-room, the others having all been attracted to the parlor by Maud's rendering of a song, consisting for the most part of deafening shrieks and trills in not very close imitation of some famous singer she had heard while "off at school."

"What a relief to have a wall between us and the prima donna," said Ward, taking out his handkerchief to affect being melted to tears by the music. With it came a letter that fell on the floor with the address uppermost.

"My letter!" exclaimed Lele, involuntarily snatching it up.

It was her application for the school which Ward had forgotten to mail! And by this time the teachers were all employed!

"Oh, Miss Fairfax, how could I have been so careless as to forget to post your letters?" Ward looked really distressed. "I *hope* they weren't important."

"Yes, they were, rather." Lele had lost all her beautiful color, but she tried to conceal her disappointment.

"I'll see that they go in the morning mail," pleaded Ward. "It won't delay them but a few days."

"No, I'll never send them now I should not have delayed writing them so long. After all it would probably have made no difference if they had been sent." And she changed the subject.

Ward soon began criticising some of Maud's paintings.

"These cows are truly *chic,*" he said. "When the picture was new, Mrs. Hubbard, who is very nearsighted, told Maud one day that she admired her November scene very much. 'But why,' asked Maud, 'do you call it a November scene?' 'Because,' said Mrs. Hubbard, innocently, 'of the fodder shocks and pumpkins.' 'Fodder shocks and pumpkins!' says Maud; 'that's my shepherd dogs driving home the cows!'" Ward laughed over this so immoderately that his mirth was infectious. It was simply impossible to avoid helping him a tiny bit in his fun-making, he

enjoyed it so thoroughly. In the midst of it all Maud herself appeared on the scene, and Ward's ridicule instantly changed to fulsome flattery. When Maud left them, Lele, tired of his nonsense, said reproachfully:

"How could you praise her falsely?"

"Oh," he replied, lightly, "Maud lives on flattery. It doesn't pay to be sincere with every one."

"Doesn't it?" said Lele, stiffly.

"A fellow can't *always* be in dead earnest, Miss Fairfax."

"One can always be sincere."

"You can, because you have a charming knack of flattering without telling positive lies. Very few people are so gifted. But when I'm in earnest, I'm as truthful as G. Washington himself."

"The trouble is to know when you *are* in earnest," said Lele, with a smile.

"I'm *always* in earnest when I'm talking with *you*," said Ward, struggling to appear grave, but bubbling into laughter. He was absolutely overflowing with high spirits to-night. Never had he looked so attractive or his mischief appeared more excusable. He was a very boy, the happiest alive. As her brother, Lele could have loved him.

"Had I a heart for falsehood formed, I ne'er could injure thee!" Lele had just quoted derisively, and Ward was leaning over her shoulder, fanning her, and doing his laughing best to convince her that he *was* sincere, when the tête-à-tête was interrupted by the entrance of a group of girls, including Trix and Maud. The

scene — his attitude and expression, Lele's arch, smiling, listening face — would have made up a charming picture had Maud been disinterested enough to enjoy it. As it was, she felt baffled and angry, sorry she had made the party, since it had turned to Lele's advantage instead of hers, as she had anticipated, and glad when the evening was over.

Syd did not spend his evening on the veranda, as Lele supposed, but by his bedroom window, where he sat hour after hour, with his arms folded on the sill, looking moodily out toward St. John's.

At last he heard the girls come home, and the sound of retreating buggy wheels on the pike. Jean peeped into the room after she came up-stairs, and seeing her brother leaning on the casement with only the starlight for company, she came forward to chide him, as she often did, for sitting in a draught late into the night. He did not appear to hear what she was saying, but began as though she had not spoken:

"Come here, Jean. I don't care to hear about the party, but I may as well tell you right now that I have made up my mind to ask Lele to marry me."

"Stuff!" said Jennie, shortly.

"You don't think she would have me, perhaps?"

"It would be a mean imposition," said Jennie, slowly. "Lele is far too good for any of us, Syd."

"Why don't you treat her better, then?"

"I — can't." The two words seemed fairly wrenched from the lips of the stubborn girl. "If the house were afire, I'd die if it was necessary to let her

get away safe. But I can't forget how I've felt toward her all these years, and until then I — won't pretend to possess an affection that I do not feel. And I don't see how you can think of asking her to marry you."

"I tell you I am driven to the wall. Her money would make me just what I must be if I ever amount to anything — master of this farm, and a man among men on Bethany Ridge."

"You might do as well somewhere else."

"Hampered as I am, I never *can* do well, unless I can get enough money somehow to give me a start up-hill. Jennie, I never will spend my days as I've been doing, humiliated and powerless. And neither, if I can help it, will I run away. I mean to make my fortune *here*, and force the people who have despised me in my poverty to respect me for my wealth. I have but one ambition now: to be the richest man on Bethany Ridge."

"You're going the wrong way to be the happiest man, Syd."

"Happy! Do I deserve domestic happiness? No, nor I don't expect it. But I must have power. And money is the only thing that will ever give me that."

"You would be no worse perhaps than other men," mused Jean.

"Worse! Ah, Jinsey, that is what hurts. All these years I have tried to be better than the average — tried harder than anybody, in the face of temptations of which *you* know nothing, to build up a good character, thinking that power could exist in that alone. And yet

my influence is nothing compared with that of the meanest *rich* man in the community. It never will be anything while I am the penniless wretch I am. A man is only gauged in this world by what he is worth in money, and that is all I mean to live for after this."

"Oh, Syd!" The girl's voice was full of pained disapproval.

"Go to bed, Jenkins, and don't talk to me," Syd replied, in a hard voice. "I've told you now what I'm going to do and why, but I don't want it ever referred to in the remotest way, whether I am successful or unsuccessful. Mind that."

She went out, and he heard her cross the hall; then her door closed, and the echo of her footsteps died away. All was now still in the house save a spider ticking in the corner like a busy watch. The clock struck twelve, and still he sat in the same position, with his chin on his folded arms, his eyes on the cold, bright stars. The wind veered, and came straight in his face like a cold breath; he was hardly conscious of it.

A very frenzy of longing to rise and walk shoulder to shoulder with other progressive men had seized him. The discouraged farmer he had been, plodding on year after year with a very insecure shelter over his head, patched clothes, and a horizon no wider than the circle of his own cobbled-up, rotting rail fences must cease to exist. He had been a good, conscientious fellow, but nobody appreciated him. No wonder. He had thought himself a very hero for his self-sacrifice. He had been only a commonplace fool!

Suddenly a scream rang through the silent house. It came from Lele's room, and Syd, who had not yet retired, was instantly in the hall, his heart filled with a nameless fear. As he reached her door, it flew open, and Lele, dressed as at the party, with the faded flowers still in her hair, fell almost fainting into his arms. Syd, glancing in through the open door, saw that the curtains were shaken as if by a wind.

"My dear *girl,* what ails you?" he asked. "You haven't been dreaming?"

"No, I hadn't retired," said Lele, recovering a little. "I was too miserable to sleep, and while I was thinking it over"—

"What had made my precious girl miserable?" Syd asked, involuntarily.

"Ward had forgotten to mail my letters," Lele replied, with a deep sigh. "While I was thinking what to do next, now my plans for Ed had failed, I looked up, and saw — *something* at the window. I don't know what."

Syd, through the open door from which a light streamed, had caught sight of something, he didn't know what, either. The window curtains near the door were parted by two long, hairy hands. A face appeared between the drapery that one did not care to glance at a second time. It was a relief to see the curtains settle back in their places, and the *thing,* whatever it was, disappear.

"My God! Is that the devil?" thought Syd.

"Oh, Syd! what, *what* is it?" gasped the terrified girl.

"I don't know, my darling. Is it not enough that you are safe with me?"

When there is a very strong and yet gentle man standing between you and danger, it is foolish to be afraid, and Lele's fears subsided.

"Thank God, you *are* safe!" he reiterated, in an agitated voice, and he held her in a closer embrace, as if fearing that she might yet become the victim of some supernatural spell.

The whole family in various stages of *dishabille* now came running into the hall, Jennie with a lamp in her hand, and with Cora and Tude weeping at her side. Ed rushed by with a revolver, Clem and Charlie at his heels, Syd having explained that a face had been seen at the window.

"I'll bet it was the suicide's ghost," whimpered Tude, in tones of horror. "Ed says he still — walks!"

"It was the ghost, *sure*," sobbed Cora. "I don't care if the Collinses do take this place. It's haunted. Boo-hoo!"

"Cora, be quiet," commanded Syd. "Lele will tell you just what she saw."

His tone was kind. There were cadences of tenderness in it that Lele had never heard before. She felt soothed by it, but it was some time before she could relate what she had seen. It was a hideous face, that was all she could tell.

"A burglar, no doubt; some tramp, probably," suggested Syd.

"It was nothing human, I am sure," sighed Lele.

Ed's revolver was now heard in repeated explosions, and he came back presently to explain that the fellow had escaped by jumping off the roof of the veranda, but that he believed he could catch him yet. Downstairs he flew, with Clem and Charlie at his heels as before, and there was a tremendous racket of doors slamming, and a chorus of shrieks from the girls to be careful and not kill each other, or run up on him and get shot.

"Jen, Lele must not be allowed to sleep in that room again; she's nervous," said Syd.

"I assure you it was not a case of nerves," declared Lele.

"Oh, let her sleep in our room," cried Cora and Tude, in a breath. "There's plenty of room."

"Jennie doesn't want me," said Lele, sadly.

"Yes, I do. I want you. Oh, Lele, I *am* sorry I've been so cruel to you when you've been so good. Forgive me, Lele," cried the unhappy but penitent girl, sinking down at Lele's feet, convulsed with sobs. The whole group were startled, impulsive and contradictory as Jennie was known to be, at the intensity of feeling she displayed.

"Don't, Jennie, dear. It's all right," said Lele, taking the girl into a loving embrace.

"You never *can* forgive me, I know; I don't deserve it," sobbed Jennie, abandoned to remorse.

"I *do* forgive you freely," said Lele, kissing her, and a smile shone through her tears. "I think, after all, my fright has done some good," she said, brightly.

"It has made us all more sensible of the ties of kindred, especially Jennie and myself. We shall never again forget that we are sisters, shall we?"

"Never again," said the girl, solemnly. She kept her word. From that hour Lele had no truer, more devoted friend than Jennie McKnight.

Syd, as the four girls disappeared within Jennie's bedroom, turned and offered Ed his hand. He had seen the latter draw the back of his rough hand across his eyes.

"We'll be better friends, too, Ed, won't we?" he asked, huskily.

Ed only said, "Well," but he took Syd's proffered hand.

"You didn't find the burglar?" Syd asked.

"No, but I saw him jump off the veranda roof. Syd, I could swear he went off on all fours. He looked in the dim light like the very devil."

Syd made no reply, but he went into all the vacant rooms and fastened the windows down. He thought of "Mimi" and of the murders in the "Rue Morgue," and shuddered. While he was planning to rob Lele of her poor little fortune, she might have perished.

Long after three of the four girls had grown calm enough to drift into the land of dreams that night, the fourth lay with her hands clasped over her eyes in dismayed wakefulness.

"If I haven't fallen in love with Syd, after all!" she thought. "And poor Aunt Roxy's money. Oh,

dear! I wish she had willed every penny of it to Ed."

* * * * * *

Syd returned to his room, but not to sleep. Perplexing, contradictory visions haunted him until the dawn came to warn him that it was time to begin another day of unremunerative toil. What was he living for, anyhow?

He left the house at daybreak and went out to the orchard, where under the bending apple boughs he walked up and down the wagon track, beside whose ruts cockle-burs were beginning to form their seeds, reminding him of the near approach of autumn. The sun was still below the horizon, and dew lay heavy on blade and leaf. When the sun came up there were countless wheels shining like silver in the meadow, the work of busy spiders while he had been weaving his dreams, evanescent as their filmy webs. He brushed one aside with his foot as he emerged from the orchard, and wondered if the heart of the little weaver was as much depressed by the ruin he had wrought as human hearts are when their plans are swept aside by the ruthless hand of Fate.

He sat dejectedly on the top of the rail fence, wondering why there seemed to be no honorable chance in this uneven world for him to make a living. Never again, after the revelation of what a blessing the love of a woman like Lele could be to a self-respecting man, could he entertain a thought of getting a start on her money.

How these words, which he had read somewhere while he was plotting to get possession of her little fortune for his own selfish ends, mocked him now:

"There is a supreme moment in the life of every man; a time when he may grasp the opportunity of a lifetime and rise into a successful, prosperous, useful, happy manhood. But the opportunity slighted is lost forever."

Probably he had lost his opportunity of a lifetime, who knows? Some lives are hampered almost beyond one's power of apprehension; Syd's was.

Some men in moods no more hopeless than his have been known to saunter from the rail fence to the barn—it is not far—pick up a halter, and instead of using it to lead one of the horses to water, employ it for a very different purpose. When, a few hours later, their dead bodies have been cut down, people have wondered how the poor fellows got up the courage to kill themselves. They forget that it sometimes requires far truer courage to *live* than to die, and leave some heart-broken woman to solve problems of life that have proved too difficult for a man. Only the coward and the deranged slip away in this fashion. Of the latter, God knows there are too many, owing largely to false ideas of what constitutes true success; the already crowded ranks of the former I trust the reader will never join.

On his way back from the barn, after feeding the horses, Syd found Jennie picking up early apples for breakfast.

She raised her eyebrows inquiringly and smiled,

which he perfectly well knew meant, "Hello, Syd. Let me congratulate you."

"I am not going to try to do what I said." Syd looked away unsmilingly, and she saw that he was very pale. "I despise myself for knowing that I ever, for a moment, considered a plan so ignoble."

"He has fallen in love with Lele," thought Jennie.

CHAPTER XVII.

"A Daughter of the House."

Lele went down to breakfast too light in heart to be disturbed by even the black-birds, which that morning made the very air quiver with their vibrant notes. Old Heldt and his cur were seen going down the lane with Clem's yellow dog barking after them, and a neighbor's donkey was leaning over the fence busily trimming the damask rose bush by the gate. Still Lele's faith in the "deep-hearted country" was reviving; she even let herself meditate a little on the before-dreaded possibility of being a farmer's wife who does her own work, or about eighteen hours a day of it, as Jennie was doing.

"There must be desperate love on both sides, though, before I could take up such a cross as that," she reflected.

She was no longer disappointed about the school, and though Ward's forgetfulness had destroyed her plans for the winter, she felt content and hopeful. The present just now was sufficient.

They were all very merry over the despoiled larder, some thief having stolen from the cellar most of the next day's provisions, but no one seemed in the least ill humored because there was nothing scarcely for breakfast. It was the first really pleasant meal she had

known since she came home; even Mr. Fairfax joked and laughed. But Lele was conscious of a keen feeling of disappointment when Syd went to his work without making any effort at a friendly tête-à-tête.

It was not until after dinner that she had a chance for more than a passing word with him. They had all been attributing the empty larder to "Lele's tramp" at dinner, and when, a little later, she chanced to meet Syd on the veranda, she said in confidence:

"I do not think my tramp was a man. But if the rest choose to believe so, they may."

Syd was silent.

"In fact, I know that it was *not* a man," she added.

"I think myself that it was a gorilla which had perhaps been stolen from some show. It is possible his master was in the cellar while he was at your window," Syd replied. (It turned out that he was right.) "Do you know, Lele, I never can quite forgive Jen for letting you sleep in that room alone?"

"It's all over now," laughed Lele. "I don't suppose she ever dreamed of a gorilla coming at midnight to look through my window."

Her face clouded over as she added: "You know my plans for next winter, Syd? I sent my letter of application to the postoffice with Ward Collins, and he forgot to mail it. Now I don't know what to do. It is too late, I suppose, to apply for a school here anywhere. I have lost the chance I depended upon unless a vacancy should occur, which is very unlikely."

"It pains me to hear you mention the subject.

Your aunt left you well provided for, and you have no right to burden yourself with the support of any one. You ought not to be here, Lele, where there is so large a demand on your sympathy. It would be far better if you could return at once to your guardian's home."

"But, Syd, it is my duty to look after Ed. And I couldn't take him into Mr. Carpenter's family, nor anywhere, unless I am prepared to meet our expenses."

"There is no way here for you to meet his expenses. Perhaps your guardian might be able to suggest something. But it clearly won't do for you to remain here until September, as your father evidently wishes."

"I am sorry you don't want me," said Lele, sensitively.

"It isn't *that*. But — it would be better for *you* if you could go."

"I am not considering myself, Syd."

"Somebody must consider you. It would be unwise to remain here, an involuntary exile from all that should make life a delight to you."

"There are other things better worth living for than ease and pleasure. God must have some work for me *here*."

They were alone together on the veranda walking up and down. Her companion was silent for many minutes.

"It is folly for any woman to begin a life of needless self-sacrifice," Syd presently resumed. "I do not see anything that you could gain by remaining here. It is not a thing to be desired to become one of an

unlucky family. I prefer to think of you as fortunate and happy, though far away. It is right to send you away, even though inhospitable. Harsh as it sounds, I really *wish* you to go."

"Then I *will* go." She turned away hurt and angry. Could this be the lover-like Syd of last night?

"And if I *do* go, Syd McKnight, you must know that we shall most likely never meet again."

"I think it hardly probable that we shall ever meet again. It would be better so, perhaps."

"Better so? Syd McKnight, what ails you? I thought you were to be a life-long friend."

"Platonic friendships are all moonshine, Lele."

A swift, light footstep sounded on the pavement and a gay voice called:

"Say, people, may I be admitted to the promenade, or is three always a crowd?"

It was Ward Collins, looking provokingly jolly, as usual.

"By no means," said Lele, giving him her hand with a gracious smile. "You are particularly welcome, for we were on the verge of a quarrel."

"Not with Syd?" exclaimed Ward, involuntarily. "Then I assure you you need expect no reconciliation. The son of Alchanamook never — forgives."

"I deny that, sir," retorted Syd, holding out his hand.

"Oh, our friendship is to be resumed, is it?"

"Is it not enough to square old accounts in the matter of grievances?"

"Not if the books are to be immediately reopened," replied Ward, warmly. "McKnight is a good hater, Miss Fairfax. And I myself a good provocator. I wonder how he ever bore with me so long."

"I am no longer a fit subject for friendship," Syd replied, sadly. "Indeed, I am not, Ward."

"He has been trying to convince me also," observed Lele. "It seems for some reason my step-brother is prepared to spend the rest of his days without that 'sweetener of life and solder of society'— friendship."

"For my part, I could not live without it," cried Ward.

"'Rare as is true love, true friendship is still rarer,'" said Syd, laconically. "I believe in neither."

"What is life without happiness?" Lele asked, ranging herself on Ward's side. "And happiness depends chiefly upon one's friends."

"Happiness depends chiefly upon one's worldly status," retorted Syd, involuntarily reverting to his thoughts of the previous night.

"You're mistaken, Syd. It's a question of temperament," said Ward. "I could contrive somehow to have a good time if I hadn't a cent in my pocket."

"Wait till you try playing the rôle of 'the moneyless man,'" Syd replied. "Your good times will take on a different complexion then."

"I can remember when your views were different, Syd."

"Time and circumstances strip a fellow of a good many illusions."

Clem at that moment came running up the veranda steps. "Dock's wound up in his rope likened to choke," he shouted.

* * * * * *

"Lele's packin' her trunk," announced Cora after supper. "Just when we are all gettin' to like her so well, too! And we have so few friends. I'd rather see the sheriff come than see her go," she added, bursting into tears.

"Why, Code!" Syd tried to speak sternly, but his voice shook. He quitted the room and ran hastily up-stairs. On Lele's door he gave not a "potential" but a deprecatory tap. Lele opened it, and he saw that the room was strewn with garments ready for packing. The girl appeared to have been crying.

"Really going?" he asked.

"Yes, Syd."

"Lele, I won't *send* you away, but don't you think seriously that it would be for your happiness to go?"

"No, Syd, I do *not.*" The sweet red lips were tremulous.

"Then you are not to go."

"I shall be intruding if I stay."

"Intruding! I deserve this for my seeming rudeness. What I dread for you is the unhappiness, the discomfort of being here at this time. Remember, child, that we may have things to bear that can't be endured with smiling faces. We shall not be able to entertain you as"—

"Entertain! I shall remain, if at all, as a daughter

of the house, not as a guest. I am not too weak to share burdens with the rest. Am I not one of you now?"

"You are one of us, Lele. But, oh! the lack of worldly wisdom you display in staying here, unless — Well — it may be you have chosen for your happiness after all." He thought of Ward with a jealous pang as he went down-stairs.

An organ agent was trying to persuade Jennie to let him place an instrument in the house when Syd reached the hall.

"It's perfectly useless!" she told him, though the longing for music, with her, was all but intolerable.

"That's what they all say," replied the agent, briskly. "I reckon it won't crack no bones, will it," he added to Syd, "if I roll this here music box into your parlor for a month or so? Then if you don't want it, I'll take it away without so much as sayin' 'Hail Columbia!'"

"It won't crack any bones," said Syd; "but it will be a bootless errand for you, my good fellow."

"That's all right," said the agent, "I'll take all resks cheerful ez a man takes his mother-in-law's departure."

And, feeling confident that *Lele* would buy it, he left the organ on trial for a month. After this the days fairly flew, for Jennie, who had picked up some knowledge of instrumental music, found in the instrument such sweet solace as Saul found in the harp of David. She sang to Lele's accompaniments, too, and

in turn Lele took a hand in the housework that the tasks might sooner be completed. At the conclusion of the week even Jennie would not consent to Lele's departure. Mr. Fairfax declared that Lele should certainly remain a month; the children demanded that she should stay *always,* and even Syd offered no further advice as to the advisability of her going. She was one of the family now in heart and soul. Even the live stock were made to offer her, in their dumb way, the freedom of the farm.

One morning Lele was called out into the lane to see what Charlie called "the dearest little cow that ever walked on four legs."

There stood Syd with his arm resting on the neck of a beautiful Jersey heifer. He was smiling, his eyes luminous with that pride which every farmer takes in well-groomed stock. It was many a day before she saw that light in his eyes again.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he asked.

"A perfect darling!" cried Lele. "The very prettiest cow I've seen since I've been in Pennsylvania. Is she a new acquisition?"

"Oh, no! We raised her. She's been in the far pasture ever since you came. But since you are really to be one of us, I want you to know the pet and plaything of the whole establishment. So I will give you an introduction to the Lady Rose."

"I wish I could paint her picture," said Lele, patting the glossy neck of Lady Rose.

"I wish you could, for I don't think there is a

more perfect animal in the State. She's about the only thing of value that I own. I wouldn't take a hundred dollars for her, bad as I need money. In fact, I'd pawn my hat and boots before I'd give up Rose. She's part of the family."

"Old Si wants her," said Clem.

"Yes, he sees her good points. He offered me forty dollars for her this morning, and that shows that he considers her worth sixty."

Jennie and all the children gathered around, and Lady Rose received quite an ovation, which she acknowledged by licking salt from their hands, and looking from one to another with her soft, kind eyes as if in greeting. City-bred as she was, Lele found their affection for the little Jersey quite infectious. Yet there was something pathetic about this tenderness shown to a dumb brute. And when she saw Syd leading his little pet down the lane by one horn she felt vaguely sorry for him. Poor Syd! to have worked so hard all these years, and now to possess but this one bit of property. It was not much of a start for Syd, ambitious as he was. But, like the farmer's boy, who started to college with only a cow for capital, and gradually attained fame in the educational world, might not Syd's cow lay the foundation for his fortune, as a farmer? Lele hoped so. She could not bear to contemplate the possibility of anything happening to Rose.

"Rose is a beaut now to what she was when I first saw her," said Charlie, watching the retreating forms of Syd and his pet with kindling eyes. "'Mem-

ber, Jen, when we looked out that awful cold fifth of January, and saw Syd carryin' a little scrawny calf in his arms to the house to keep it from freezin'. I wouldn't have given *that* for her chances then?" he added, snapping his fingers.

"Father wouldn't either, or he'd never have sold her to Syd for fifty cents," Clem added. "Lucky Syd paid for her, or pap would have traded her off long ago."

Syd's face wore a troubled look when he came to dinner that day.

"Rose is sick," he said. "I don't know what ails her, but I do believe she's going to die."

Jennie's face blanched. She said nothing, but Lele observed that she ate no dinner. The meal was hurried through almost in silence, and immediately afterward the whole family, except Mr. Fairfax, who had a visitor to entertain, went down to the pasture, where the beautiful little Jersey lay sick. Al kinds of medical aid were summoned, but all to no purpose. When Lele went out next day to meet Syd in the cold dawn of a cloudy morning (he had camped in the pasture and kept vigil with his little favorite) he looked like a man bereaved of a friend. Her heart cried out with sympathy, but her lips could not form a syllable.

"Rose is dead."

Syd uttered the words slowly. He looked haggard and hollow-eyed. He felt as a man feels when he has lost at one blow his last piece of property and something he had loved. Lele burst into tears. She had

so longed for him to escape this trial. It was pitiable to possess so little that a loss like this could so affect a strong young fellow like Syd.

"It's no use making a fuss over a cow," Syd said, presently. "Most people wouldn't care a great deal for a thing like this, but — it takes the heart all out of me, Lele."

"It's no wonder," said Lele, in tears. "I know just how you feel. Think of dragging off that beautiful little creature and dumping her into a hollow, as I saw Mr. Heldt do one of his cows."

"I couldn't do that. She died some time after midnight, and I dug a hole right there and buried her. Ed helped me. There's nothing half so hard for me to do as to hitch up a sled and drag off the body of an animal."

He swept his shirt sleeve over his eyes. "You'd think me a fool, Lele, if you knew how many times I've tramped to that far pasture just to see if Rose was safe. I've gone there sometimes after dark because I imagined something had happened to her. She was the only thing in the world that I could call my own."

"I never was so sorry for anything," sobbed Lele. "Oh, Syd, how *can* you go on with this hateful farming? There's more heartbreak in it than I ever imagined."

"I don't suppose it has any more drawbacks than other occupations," Syd replied, patiently. "It is, of course, foolish to get attached to dumb brutes as I did to Rose, but somehow a farmer can't help it. All

kinds of live stock are so dependent upon you, that you can't help feeling a sort of tenderness for them; and it makes losing them in this way doubly hard. Rose's death will cast a gloom over our entire household. We all know it seems a silly piece of sentiment, and yet we can't help feeling bad. One reason I buried her so soon was that I don't want the children down in the pasture crying over her. Tell Jennie, will you, Lele? I'd rather not."

That day was one to be remembered. Lele wondered, when she laid her head on her pillow that night, if *her* death would ever cause so many tears to flow as had the death of the gentle little Jersey cow. Even Charlie showed little relish for his supper.

"I feel so fightin' *mad,* Lele," he said, "to think we can't have anything nice like other people without losin' it, that I don't know what to do. No wonder Jinks feels stormy in her old alpaca. I feel like a cyclone, to-night, myself. I wish you could have seen old Si stickin' his nose over the fence this afternoon. 'Hi, Syd, better took that forty dollars I offered you fer yer cow. Forty dollars is a long sight better'n a dead cow.' If I could turn to a twister, an' blow Si's ole spotted cows to ribbons, it would just do me good."

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Several weeks passed so rapidly that Lele had scarcely a moment to think and plan as she had expected. Though she had frequent talks with her father about Ed, she was as far as ever from forming

any plan that could benefit Ed or any member of the family. She had, however, given up her trip west with the Carpenters, and was undecided just how and where she was to spend the winter. In that respect the rest of the family were, alas! as much at sea as herself. The mortgage might be foreclosed any day and the whole household broken up. All was in a painful state of uncertainty when you came to think of it, and yet what with Ward calling so often and bringing so many of the young people of the Ridge with him, the old house took on an air of liveliness unknown to it for years. Even Cora had become a social factor, with the gray cashmere and India linen lengthened becomingly by Lele's deft fingers, and a new hat (made for her, also by Lele, out of old material), that was declared, even by such a severe critic as Charlie, to be a "duck." Ol Stuart (who had suddenly emerged from jackets into a Prince Albert of fabulous length) vacillated between Fairfax Farm and "The Cedars," as Sue Hubbard proudly denominated her home.

"Sue does well enough to go with at a pinch," the faithless Ol would tell Cora one evening, and the next would inform Sue that "Code was well enough to pass away the time with when a fellow couldn't do better," which induced the girls, when they compared confidences, to mutually agree that "Ol was a perfect *stick* — don't you know — but when fellows were so scarce it wouldn't do to give him the shake complete."

These young things were too immature in feeling

to take life and love seriously, and they really got quite a good deal of pleasure out of the latter part of that memorable summer. There were older hearts, however, that ached through it all, though the ache was masked under a very calm exterior.

CHAPTER XVIII.

An Unwillin' Barkis.

There was a "festival" at Bethany Church, and the band was playing. The aisles were full of gay promenaders, and the elderly people and "wall flowers" sat in the pews gossiping, while outside, in a maze of Chinese lanterns, ice-cream and other refreshments were being served from tables clustered around a gayly decorated stand.

Jennie had a table upon which she waited with rather a listless air. Maud and Trixie and most of the other girls had early found substitutes and joined in the promenade — an indecorous, waltz-like affair at which Mrs. Stuart and other "pillars" winked for the sake of worldly gain. All the young people liked to come to Bethany festivals, since there was a band and promenading. They bought liberally, and the church debt dwindled. Mrs. Stuart, with her cake-knife in hand, seemed resolved to cut it in twain. Mrs. Stuart always cut the cakes. She had a reputation for making more slices and fewer crumbs than any other lady in the congregation.

Jen looked haughty and unapproachable. No one would have supposed from her manner that she cared for the promenade or would have thought it otherwise than wicked. She had expressed such sentiments in

the hearing of more than one young man and at least one elderly one — Mr. Markley, a fat sheep-raiser of sixty, who had annoyed her by hanging around her table all evening, "keeping trade away," as Maud had maliciously whispered. He had little, pale eyes sunk like beads in a mask of dough. His fat face was florid, his head bald, his nose broken, and his tuft of chin whiskers made him look, as Charlie said, "like a Billy-goat."

"Hi, Miz' Billy," that incorrigible youth would whisper every time he went by, his mouth stuffed with peanuts.

Now, after a very short promenade with a widow not much to his fancy, came this broken-nosed and bald-pated admirer back like a bad penny. No one, it seemed, had any use for him. The girls dodged him as cleverly as though engaged in a game of "blind man's buff." He seemed, however, determined to make himself attractive to the fair sex. Had he not worn a stiff collar at the risk of severing a jugular in the vain hope of appearing youthful? Attentive to the ladies he would be in spite of rebuffs; but to none was he so persistently devoted as to Jean McKnight. People who had no great regard for appearances said "it would be a good match for Jen."

"Miss Jennie, you look paler and paler every time I come around," he said, on his third round. "*Do* leave this here stupid table a spell. All the other gals is gone."

"I'm not tired, thank you," said Jennie, haughtily;

"and I'd rather be here than in that crowded church."

"*'Tis* right down pleasant out here," said Mr. Markley, seating himself on one of her chairs. "Bring two sassers of cream, Jinny, an' less hev a snack."

Jen's eyes rained lightning upon him, but he was too absorbed to notice. To be exact, his collar was so tight that he could not have turned his head the fraction of an inch if he had tried. He wondered if there was room inside his throat for ice-cream to go down.

Ward and Lele came laughingly down the church steps and seated themselves opposite Mr. Markley. Ward beckoned to Jen and whispered in her ear when she came:

"Bring *three* dishes, Jinsey, and promenade with me afterwards, won't you? Miss Fairfax is going to take charge of your table."

Jen brought the three dishes and sat by Ward, not even glancing at the discomfited widower, who swallowed half his cream, refused cake, and hurried from the table, purple and panting.

"What is the matter with him?" asked Ward "He seems on the verge of apoplexy."

"I fear I offended him," said Jennie, whose cheeks now were scarlet. "Please don't mention him, Ward. He has made the whole evening hideous for me."

"Sorry I didn't know it sooner," Ward glanced twice at her with kindling admiration. Lele was conversing with Trix and Morris, who had just sat down. "I feel sorry for him. But it's a fact; he's too old

for you, Jinsey. 'There is no fooling with life after you are turned forty.'"

"It would be all one to me if he were turned eighty."

"'Oh, woman, in your hours of ease,
Uncertain, coy and hard to please!'"

quoted Ward, maliciously.

"Who *could* be pleased with Mr. Markley?"

"The world, my dear Jinsey, considers Mr. Markley an attractive man. He has solid qualifications."

"Probably that is why he is so heavy," retorted Jean.

"I never thought he had much wit," Ward resumed, "but when I heard that he had selected you for Number 2, in his series of wives — or is it 3? — he was appreciated in his younger days,— I could not deny that his judgment was fine."

"Really?" Jean glanced up a moment later and beheld the widower's eyes gleaming mournfully out of the gloom beyond the row of lanterns.

"Look at his eyes!" whispered Ward, "and his tongue is hanging out. Jean, I tell you he's choking."

"Nonsense!"

"He *is!* That collar of his is two sizes too small. I bid for his epitaph: 'He had been a kind husband, was an indulgent father, and at the time of his demise, a devoted lover.'"

"How very clever you are!" said Jean.

The three arose, and Lele began to invest herself in Jennie's cap and apron. Ward said:

"You should not make yourself so pretty, Miss Fairfax, or you will have all the trade at your table and be overworked. Worst of all," he added, anxiously, "you will attract Mr. Markley."

"If you should," said Jennie, relentingly, "try to condone my offense."

"I will," said Lele, absently. She was not thinking of Mr. Markley.

"Markley goes with this table," said Ward. "It's like buying a hoodooed house — the ghost goes with it."

Lele's cheeks suddenly flushed at the mention of the word "ghost." At the same time she caught sight of Syd and Maud St. John sitting in a buggy on the other side of the stand. They appeared to be talking over, perhaps making up, old differences. Lele had been with Ward almost the entire evening, though involuntarily her eyes had been busy, in search of Syd, whom she had never once seen. She knew he was present, and had been wondering where he kept himself. Now she knew. He had been sitting in that buggy all evening with Maud!

Jen wore a thin, white dress and black velvet girdle, which Lele had contrived for her, and in which she looked well. The girl's face, like her brother's, depended mainly upon its expression for its beauty. When she passed Mr. Markley on Ward's arm, the former scarcely recognized her.

"Darned ef she *ain't* good lookin'!" he thought, staring after her. "'Tain't much good, though, her

black eyes 'll ever do *me*. She's sot ag'in me; that's plain ez envy. Wonder ef her step-sister wouldn't make a purty good step-mother fer my boys. No harm in askin' her. She can't mor'n say 'No.' She's real good-natured-lookin', an' they say she's got money, too. B'lieve I'll try my luck, bein' as I've got on this collar. The darned thing was too much trouble to put on fer nothin'."

Lele was too tender-hearted to see any one suffer, and when Mr. Markley came up she greeted him very kindly, ate ice-cream with him, and tried in every way to make him forget Jen's cruelty. He rewarded her by making her a present of a huge pound-cake frosted all over with gum-drops—the largest one obtainable and the most thickly becandied. In the face of such unexpected generosity, how could Lele refuse when he asked the pleasure of seeing her home? It was Lele who looked pale when Ward and Jennie returned.

"You don't say he's been here ever since we left?" asked Jennie, with horror.

"Ever since." Lele drew a sigh of fatigue.

"This table *is* hoodooed," declared Ward, aside to the girls. "Suppose we all desert it. There's Alice Stuart just dying for some good work. Give her a chance. It may be the means of marrying her off."

Alice took charge with gentle dignity. She was never a sprightly girl, but to-night she was a shade quieter than usual. Keith had not once spoken to her.

"What ails Keith to-night, Alice?" Ward asked.

"When I saw him a while ago he looked like a young thunder-cloud."

"I didn't notice," said Alice, placidly, and devoutly prayed forgiveness for the fib. She brought a dish of ice-cream with two spoons in it for a gawky youth and his ogle-eyed sweetheart, which sent Ward off half suffocated with suppressed laughter. He ran headlong into a group of young people who were discussing something very earnestly.

"I haven't known him speak to her for six months," said one. "Thought they had quit for good."

"Sh!" whispered another, as Ward and the girls joined them.

"Oh, it's a caucus, is it?" said Ward. "Beg pardon."

"It's a caucus," said Ol Stuart, "but we're adjourned."

"That means you were discussing me," wailed the irrepressible Ward. "Boo-hoo! What have I done?"

Everybody laughed, and amid a chorus of protests there was a general movement toward the candy stand.

The band wound up "Creole Belles" with a flourish, marched down the aisle, packed their instruments in the band wagon, and sat down to their *third* free lunch of cake and ice-cream in the flare of the torches before the old stone church. Keith Hubbard lurked in the shadows glowering at Syd, who still talked with Maud.

Buggies began to roll away. Whole families bundled themselves into wagons and spring-wagons, crowding in "Georgie 'millons" and empty freezers. The cake auction began, and the remnant of the crowd pressed open-mouthed about the stand.

Mr. Markley stood at the auctioneer's elbow holding Lele's cake. She had rashly promised to ride home in his buggy. Ward stood directly behind Lele and whispered in her ear some request which she refused in pantomime; he bit his lip in vexation and devoted himself to Jennie.

Several frosted cakes were bid off at a low figure. A large cake, with a bouquet in the center, plentifully bestuck with candy hearts and red drops, was held up on a large stem glass cake stand. It had a border of tissue paper cut in fancy patterns. To top all, a knot of blue satin ribbon adorned the stem of the stand. A murmur of admiration greeted it.

"This cake," shouted the auctioneer, "was made by Miss Maud St. John. Boys, there's not a sweeter cake in the whole collection. It cost seventy cents. Do I hear a bid on this lovely cake?"

"Eighty cents!" cried Ward.

"Eighty cents is bid. Who will raise it? Remember, it's for the widows an' orphans. Bill Markley over here is the widow, and I'm the orphan. We need it."

Amid a roar of laughter Keith Hubbard was heard bidding defiantly, "Ninety cents."

"Ninety cents for the finest cake ever sold at a *fête,* worth one dollar and a quarter. Ninety-five, do I hear it?"

"One dollar," shouted Ol Stuart, with reckless disregard to his mother's shaking head. The crowd at this woke up and fairly bid itself hoarse. Every young man in the neighborhood seemed to want Maud's cake. It was finally knocked off to Keith Hubbard, who took particular pains to let Maud see that he was the buyer.

"Crackee! But I'm glad Keith got it instead of me," Ward whispered to Jennie. (He inherited his father's fondness for good bargains.) "Maud's cakes are like herself — all the sweetness is on the surface. I know 'em!"

Mr. Markley shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, thankful he had bought Lele's cake earlier in the evening. With his neck in such a fix he felt that bidding would have been dangerous work. Besides, he had still some fears that Lele would give him the slip and go home in Ward's buggy. He wished a thunderstorm would come up and scatter the crowd. But the stars never shone clearer.

"Lele, give him the shake," whispered Jennie. "Your sympathy is carrying you too far."

"I don't care if it is," said Lele. She had just seen Syd escort Maud to her father's carriage.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the back part of the crowd. One of Maud's rejected suitors, who was usually tipsy at festivals, having failed to get the coveted cake, had vowed vengeance. As Keith passed

him with his hard-won trophy, that fortunate and yet luckless (since Maud had ignored him all evening) gentleman received a staggering blow between the shoulders. He turned and struck back. The cake slipped from its newspaper wrapping to the ground, and Keith's assailant sprang upon it with both feet.

"If I can't have Maud's cake, no other fellow shall," he shouted, and in less time than it takes to tell it he had executed a clog dance upon it with destructive results. Keith rushed furiously to the rescue, but too late. All that remained was a mass of crumbs, shattered icing and broken hearts. Red drops strewed the grass on every side like drops of blood.

Keith had never made a fighting reputation, but the experiences of the evening, culminating in such unlooked-for disaster, had keyed him up to attempt acts of desperation. He closed with the destroyer of so much sweetness, and they went down together, crushing to atoms what was left of the cake. When peace officers had separated them and borne the unsuccessful bidder from the field, Keith, mortified as well as enraged, was only too glad to shake the sticky red drops from his hair and make his escape. Ward was so convulsed with laughter that he could offer but little consolation.

"That's a bad one on Hubby," he said. "I never knew the dear old man to be so thoroughly *picked up*. It was bad enough for me to do."

Ward took Jennie home, and shortly afterward Lele arrived with her cake and a wilted bouquet, principally

marigolds, which the widower had bidden off for her at an extravagant figure.

"Poor child!" said Jennie, when the two girls were alone together in the dining-room, "you deserve a crown for your goodness to me to-night. I'll never leave him on your hands again."

"Do you care for him, Jinsey?"

"Not a straw!"

"I am so glad, Jennie. I thought at first you had broken his heart, he seemed so dejected. I did what I could to console him, for I truly pity any man who is despised by the woman he loves."

"Yes, and"—

"He invited me to take the place of Mrs. Markley, No. 1."

"Lele!"

"He really did. He as good as admitted that he preferred you, but as he could not get you, he would take me."

"And was Barkis willin'?"

"Barkis was not. Barkis declined the honor."

They heard the front door open. Syd ran lightly up the stairs and his door closed with a slight bang. He went across to the window and began whistling softly. A bar or two of "Creole Belles" was wafted downward.

Lele turned her face away from the light.

"Maud has in some way regained her old power over him," she thought.

But Maud, far from having regained her old power over Syd, was at that very moment saying peevishly to Kitty:

"Such a beastly stupid evening as I've had, after all! I could not even have the pleasure of getting any fun out of Syd McKnight, though I did my level best."

"Why, Maud!" exclaimed the guileless Kitty. "I thought Syd was all devotion. Things looked that way."

"Devotion!" Maud echoed, as she began nervously to twist her blond tresses up on kid curlers. "He read me such a lecture on coquetry as I shall not soon forget, I promise you. Said he'd been wanting to have a talk with me for ever so long. And such a talk! It beat all the sermons I ever heard."

"Did he bring you around to his view? Or, rather, did you succeed in making him forget the interview on the hill the other Sunday?"

"I should think *not*. I see clearly that I've lost my last scrap of power over the hateful fellow. And it's just too provoking, for there are times when I could play him off against the others to pretty good advantage, poor as he is."

"Yes, the effect upon Keith and several others this evening was — all that could be desired," laughed Kitty. "But I wouldn't have wasted a whole evening on old Syd. He'll be in the market for some time yet."

"In the market — yes. I doubt if he *ever* marries, judging by the way he talked this evening. But after

the way he spoke I can never count on him again. Well — his eloquence rather fascinated me," she added, with a sigh.

"He's sharp as a tack," said Kitty.

"Sharp! He's the only fellow on Bethany Ridge endowed with brains," said Maud, walking about nervously. "I half wish yet that I'd never let him get beyond my reach. But he's gone, now, past recall."

CHAPTER XIX.

Brother and Sister.

It was the first of August, and the air seemed full of fiery arrows. The brown meadows shimmered under a cloudless sky, and cloudless it had been now for weeks. The brooks were all dried up, the ponds empty, and crops dying. It was the most severe drought in years.

Syd went about looking absorbed and absent-minded. He had formed another plan, which was slowly consuming to ashes under the influence of this pitiless sun. The drought was so severe now that he could do but little except repair fences, and he was at that work this evening when Si Collins, with his old brownish straw hat curled up at the ears and his cob pipe stuck between his yellow teeth, came up with a hoe over his shoulder.

"Hello, Syd!" jocularly. "Got the interest money about all collected yet?"

"About," said Syd, laconically. The very sight of his neighbor's hard, shrewd face made him heart sick.

"Not much show for a crop this year, especially for late corn and tobacker," Collins went on between puffs. "*Mine's* early and part of it new ground. I'll have a pretty fair crop if it don't rain; but that old,

late-set tobacco of yours won't be worth cuttin'. How's your potatoes?"

"Pretty fair, but not so good as I expected. What will you give for them — on the mortgage?"

"Nothin'! They're sunburnt. Wouldn't have 'em at any price. You ought to see *mine*. I dug 'em an' marketed 'em last week; brought me seventy-five cents a bushel. The market will be glutted before you get yours in. Ought to have dug 'em a couple of weeks ago."

"I haven't had time." Syd felt tempted to brain his tormentor with the broken fence-rail he had in his hand. "If I hadn't so much blamed fence fixin' to do I should get along faster," he added, in an angry tone.

"You haven't a sound rail on the place, have you?" squinting at the various heaps of brush and rails that did duty for fences. "You ought to see *mine*. I've got a dandy lot of rails made a-purpose to use on — well, the next farm I buy." And filling his old cob pipe, he blew a puff of smoke in Syd's face, as though to add injury to insult.

"You mean this one, I suppose." Syd was boiling now with suppressed rage.

"You ought to be glad to get it off your hands. I declare, the work you do here is breaking you down faster than any young man I know. You'll be white-headed before you're forty at the rate you've been going."

"A mortgage *is* a good thing to sprout gray hairs." Syd had already found a few. He wondered if they

were so noticeable as to attract attention. Attributing them all to Si Collins, he half formed a resolution to revenge himself upon his neighbor Eugene-Aram fashion. He wondered how long it would take detectives to discover Si's pestiferous body in the dark recesses of the thicket beyond the fence.

Si, utterly unconscious of his danger, socked his hoe down on a clod and waxed confidential.

"Tell you what, Syd," he said, after a few puffs at his old cob pipe, "this here implement that I've got in my hand ain't no bad pick to dig gold out of a farm."

"It has been for me," said Syd, glancing bitterly at the hoe.

"Yes, an' precious bad fer that ole step-dad o' yours, too. Some men never learn how to get the upper hand of a hoe. Now there's Ome Fairfax. I c'n remember when he rode in his kerridge, and I hadn't so much ez a plug to pull in a plough. But in them days I could waltz all round Ome with a hoe, an' can yet, for that matter. I never saw the day when Ome could hoe a row with me, never! Used to be too stuck up, an' now he actilly couldn't clean out a truck patch if his life depended on it. He hung his hoe on an apple tree to rust, but I kep' a lickin' in with mine till I hoed an independent fortune out of the dirt."

"With your father-in-law's help," said Syd, drily.

"Old Man Ward never really helped me much, Syd. I'd have stuck in the mud *shore* if it hadn't been for this friendly ole hoe. When I die, I'm a goin' to leave directions to have a hoe cut in my monument."

"If I were set to carve the design, you'd get a bunch of bristles," said Syd, *sotto voce.*

"I've often thought," Si went on seriously, "of havin' a wheat shock cut in the marble, but I believe I like the hoe best. I've dug out a pile o' tobacker money with a hoe in my time, Syd."

"I wish I could say as much."

"'Pears like your luck don't run that way. Tell you what I'd do, Syd, just give up an' let me foreclose in September. Branch off for yourself, boy, an' let the ole man root, hog, or die. The way things look now, Ward'll be likely to give your step-sister a home on the ole place. If I get it, I mean to make it over to Ward, give him rails an' pickets enough to rebuild the fences, an' let him git a livin' out of it if he can. There's good dirt here, if 'twas farmed right."

Syd would have given much if Mr. Collins could at that moment have been transformed into a rattlesnake, he did so long to have the pleasure of beating the life out of him.

"When are they to be married?" he asked, as coolly as though he only wanted to know the price of oats. In fact, every nerve was unstrung and every drop of blood tingling. Fighting would have been far more to his taste just then than fence-building; but Syd, with all his strength and temper, had never cared for pugilistic fame.

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose you are better posted about Ward's affairs than I am; you used to be. She's a good lookin' girl, an' will have a tidy bit o' property

of her own, I hear, when she marries. I wonder you didn't set your cap for her yourself, Syd. You might have bought in the place with her money, you know."

Si was treading on thin ice, but unconsciously. He blew another whiff of smoke into Syd's face. The young man wondered where his tormentor got his tobacco. It seemed to have been culled from the worst trash that Bethany Ridge could raise.

"Hell hath no odor like an old cob pipe," he thought. "That's one solace he'll have down there — his pipe."

"You might have made good use of Lele's money," persisted Si.

"True, I might." Syd's tone was repellant. He could not imagine anything harder than to control his furiously rising temper, but he kept cool.

"Rich girls ain't to be picked off every bush, Syd."

"Is it easier to love a rich girl than a poor one?"

"Yes, siree! a darned sight easier! It's elevatin', too. I wouldn't have my present influence in the community if I had married somebody's hired girl, or stayed single as you're doin'."

"Judge Ward never forgave you for running away with his daughter, did he?" Syd's tone was full of repressed contempt.

"Not exactly. But he did a good part by her, all the same, and left all his money to my children when he died." Si moved away a few steps, and then looked back. "Oh, how's your shoats gettin' along?"

"Tolerably well."

"Only tolerable? You ought to see *mine*. They

are fine, I tell you. Make whackin' big hogs by November."

"Yes, I've seen them quite frequently." Syd felt that the last feather had been added. "They picked up most of their living in our crops, and I intend to shoot the very next one that sticks his nose through the fence."

"Come, now, Syd, keep cool," said Mr. Collins, in a bantering tone. "Remember whose part of the fence they get through."

"What the dicks do I care *whose* part of the fence they get through? I've been driven fairly mad with your stock, and I'm going to put a stop to it if I have to make fertilizer of every confounded hoof on your farm."

"Better not. You'll have a lawsuit on your hands if you try it. Don't s'pose I could make anything off of you, though. 'Sue a beggar an' git a louse,' you know."

"Beggar!" Syd was by this time livid with rage. "Si Collins, if you don't get off this farm, I'll *kick* you off, if you *are* an old man. I've stood all I'm going to from you. And, mind you, don't you or a hoof of yours, man or beast, cross the line fence again."

"All right. We'll stay away until after the middle of September," said Si, pocketing his empty pipe. "Then I and my stock will come to stay, and you an' yours will make tracks fer the last time. I won't give you a day to pack," and with a parting oath he hurried away.

Syd stood still in one of his white rages, and watched him out of sight. Then he went on with his work.

"I'll raise the money to buy in this farm if I have to hang for it!" he thought. "I can do it honestly, though, and *I will*."

He worked for a while with desperate energy, and presently his mood changed. Visions of the wheat shock and hoe on Si's monument made him shake with silent laughter.

Then a sickening fear, harder to bear than all Si's taunts, smote him. Suppose, after all, he could not secure the loan of a sum sufficient to buy in the farm? Long years would intervene before he would be in a position to ask Lele to share his home. Try as he would he could not but feel that it would be a mean act to ask her to share the fortune that might never come to him at all.

Supper bells began to send forth their summons from the various farm-houses. Syd went home with lagging steps.

That morning he and Lele had had a little talk that had raised his spirits somewhat, but now they were lower than ever. He had been for several days more than usually despondent, owing partly to the drought that was rendering useless the work of months.

"Syd," Lele had begun, "I want a business talk with you. To be candid, I don't think you are succeeding in farming, are you?"

"I'm on the verge of ruin," Syd replied, desperately. "Everybody knows it, too."

"I've seen ever since I've been here how you've been fretting over your work, and it makes my heart ache."

"What a poor stick I must be to flaunt my woes before your eyes in such a feeble-minded way," said Syd, deeply mortified.

"I didn't mean that you had said anything fretful. It's precisely because you are so quiet and uncomplaining that I feel so sorry for you."

"It takes a weak kind of fellow to appreciate pity," said Syd, inwardly writhing. "Dispense with that, please."

"It seems that I can't, as you Pennsylvanians say, get *any purchase* on the subject. What I wish to say is this: You are a born farmer if you had a chance. It isn't your fault nor the fault of farming that you don't succeed. It seems unfilial to say it, but we both know the fault is father's. His extravagance and mismanagement have swallowed up one thing after another of the crops, stock and implements until you have nothing to farm with, and no heart for it. It is no wonder that debt, discouragement and overwork have so nearly ruined the peace of the whole family. You know there is no hope of better things until my father ceases to be master here."

"I know it, and yet I have shrunk from doing anything so ungrateful as trying to oust him," said Syd, hesitatingly.

"I do not think you will long have a choice in the matter. The farm will soon change hands, and if you could once get possession and work it in your own way, I think you would be successful as a farmer, unless your hopes are still for a profession."

"I should prefer farming, I believe. I only turned to something else because I was so hopeless of ever getting on here, either financially or intellectually. I often in those days asked myself Solomon's question: 'How can he get wisdom that holdeth the plow, and that glorieth in the goad, that driveth oxen and is occupied in their labors?' I do not now think that the right kind of farming necessarily interferes with culture, and since I have served my apprenticeship and fitted myself for it, I should like to make it my life work if ever I could be permitted to farm as I think it should be done."

"I would borrow the money if I were you, and buy in the farm. For if it is *yours,* and you have the 'say so' in everything, and give Jennie a share in what you make and the children what they really earn, I know it will be more satisfactory all around. I will ask my guardian to lend you enough money on your own note to rebuild the fences and put them and the buildings in complete repair. You can then get rid of the present tenants, put in good ones, and with hope instead of despondency, and system instead of haphazard, all will go well. Father will be well satisfied to live on his salary and be away from here. Indeed, he seems to be away chiefly as it is. I will contrive

some way yet to keep Ed with me until he learns a trade. By mutually helping each other we shall be a happy family."

"I will think of it," said Syd, thoughtfully. He did not tell her how pleased he was to find that her views exactly accorded with his own; he could not trust himself to enter into confidences that might betray a secret, which, for the present, he must carefully guard.

* * * * * * *

When Syd came in after his day's work was done, he found Lele sitting on the veranda alone. Everything was very still out of doors. Only the crickets chirped, and in the hall he heard the fine droning of mosquitoes. Syd was about to pass the white-clad figure in the big willow rocker and go up to his room, when she spoke in a low, pained voice:

"Syd, why do you treat me so coldly? You never notice me any more unless I am the first to speak. What have I done?"

He paused, irresolutely, as a man must in the face of danger, and then went back and seated himself in the vacant chair by her side. He felt in no mood for talking, and wished she had not spoken to him.

"You don't seem happy to-night, Syd," Lele observed, wistfully.

"Happy?" his heart was so wrung with depressing fears and anxieties that he could have cried out with pain.

"You've been thinking over my plan?" she questioned.

"Yes," silence again. Syd was growing desperate. He wanted a chance to show her once for all that his distrait manner had its origin in something else than love-sickness. She would be more free to choose between him and Ward if she was sure he was not "eating his heart out" with jealousy.

"Lele," he said at last, taking her hand, "I'm afraid after all that I seem the very last to take you into my heart as my own sister. I've often thought I ought to speak of it — of how glad I truly am that we are and must always be bound by ties of such close relationship — ties that can never be broken."

Lele was silent.

"Will you give me one kiss to show that you accept in all his moods and tenses a brother who may always be trusted, but must not often be questioned?"

He was so grave and matter-of-fact that the smile and blush faded from Lele's face. He kissed her coldly as Jennie might have done had she been forced to perform that distasteful duty in the time of her bitterest animosity. Lele awoke with a shock to the consciousness that Syd never had, never could love her. Brothers might, indeed, kiss her after that mechanical fashion; lovers, never. It was a relief to both to hear the boys come trooping through the hall.

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In the gray of the clear summer morning, when

Jennie peeped into Syd's room to tell him it was time to feed the horses, she was startled to find that the bed had not been slept in. Syd was sitting before the open window with his head on his arms in his well-known attitude of dejection.

"Why, Syd, what ails you?" asked the startled girl. "Haven't you been asleep? Are you sick? What *can* be the matter?"

"Is it morning?" asked Syd, drowsily. "I didn't know it was so late. Had the toothache," he explained, "and couldn't sleep a wink," turning his face away from Jennie's searching gaze.

"Syd, you never *have* the toothache. It's something else; something that I don't know anything about. Tell me, won't you? I've heard so much bad news"— Jen's voice shook. She looked prepared for anything. That one of the horses was dead she felt sure; there was a moment of harrowing uncertainty as to *which* one.

Syd turned toward her impatiently.

"It isn't anything at all. Pray, save your tragedies till they're needed. The toothache is something all flesh is heir to, I reckon. I'm not the first fellow that has lost a few hours' sleep with it, am I?"

"I know what ails you," said Jennie, "but you'd sooner cut off one of your hands than talk with me about it. Seems to me I'd talk it over and have it off my mind."

"Running after people to share my mental burdens

is not in my line, as you know," Syd replied. "Better drop the subject, Jen."

Jennie looked hard at the fair morning landscape looming up out of the night mist; then her eyes met Syd's, and seeing how weary and hopeless he looked, a great wave of pity and longing to aid him swept over her, and the dark, bright eyes grew luminous and soft with tears.

"Don't, *don't* mind it, Syd," she said, brokenly. "It's no use to care for anything. We're cursed and branded, and oughtn't to expect any peace or happiness from any one in *this* world. They weren't intended for us."

"I agree with you there," cried Syd, starting up. "I wonder why we are such fools as to care. I do, indeed."

"We're neither sticks nor stones," said Jennie, sullenly. "We feel the same as other people."

"We must cultivate endurance, like the Indians," said Syd, getting up and walking about the room. "Whining won't help matters any, that's certain."

"It wouldn't do any harm to let me know what kept you sitting by that window all night," said Jennie.

"If it were the first night I've sat there all night when my distracting thoughts wouldn't let me sleep, it might seem more worth talking about," said Syd, evasively. "There's one thing, Jinsey, that I've decided on."

"To sell?" asked Jennie, with a gasp.

"No; that old maids and bachelors are true mar-

tyrs, and ought every one to have a crown for what they are compelled to suffer in the flesh," with a nervous laugh.

"You've been fretting over Lele," said Jennie, gloomily.

Syd at last made his confession:

"I tried last evening to convince Lele how utterly indifferent I was to her, except as a step-brother, and I think I was successful. It cost me dear, I can tell you."

"If you *are* in love with her," said Jennie, "why not be man enough to say so?"

"Because," said Syd, ambiguously.

"And what does that mean?"

"Don't you know? Stop and think a minute what *I* have to offer any woman."

"Debt, discouragement and drudgery," said Jennie.

"Just that." Syd opened the door—"Until I have a more munificent dowry than *that* to offer I'll never speak of marriage to any woman."

"You did to Maud," retorted Jennie.

"I beg your pardon, Jean. I did not."

"Syd, I always thought she refused you."

"No doubt she would had I ever given her a chance. But facts are facts, and if my worldly prospects do not improve, I propose to go down to my grave, be it fifty years hence, without having once said, 'Will you be mine?' to any woman." He made a faint attempt to whistle as he went down-stairs. It was a failure.

CHAPTER XX.

At the Stile.

On a low stile in the tall, neglected willow hedge that lay between the far pasture and Si Collins's woods, Jennie sat with her chin in her hand, lost in thought. She had come to drive home the cows, but still the industrious beasts were busily cropping the short, sun-burnt grass, their dappled sides burnished with the red rays of the setting sun. Above and behind her lay a dense woods; half the houses on Bethany Ridge were visible below. She could even catch glimpses of the far-away Susquehanna, lying like a stream of liquid silver at the base of the green hills. The wind blew steadily from the west and tossed back the dark hair from her brow. A magnificent sunset made the west gorgeous with color, and never had the landscape, made up of wooded hills, grassy vales and broad, cultivated fields, appeared more beautiful than now, with the evening light upon it. But her surroundings, for once, made no impression upon the girl's mind. She was striving bravely to face the problems of the future, which now seemed so dark.

Jean possessed one talent that she had an unutterable longing to cultivate — a beautiful voice. Music had been her one hobby, and a musical instrument

above all things most coveted. Yet every other girl in the neighborhood had a piano, and Jennie had none. As a child, her chief amusement had been to make a keyboard out of black and white-handled knives and forks and play that it was a piano. By using this, under Trix's skillful teaching, she had learned to finger and to play chords in several keys. Mr. Fairfax called this childish folly. He had no music in his soul, and could see no reason for cultivating an art that at best seemed to him but a foolish waste of time. Jean's musical education had not progressed very far until Lele came. Its progress under Lele's tuition was rapid, phenomenal. Both girls felt that here was a talent that should not be tied up in a napkin.

"I have never heard a finer voice than yours," Lele had said that very day. "If cultivated, it would make you famous."

Jennie had been told the same thing by others, and was willing enough to believe it. But between Jean McKnight and possible fame lay a great gulf. Humanly speaking, she saw no chance of ever being able to cross it.

She rose and walked back and forth beside the waving willows.

"I must have means," she thought. "I must have freedom to work and plan for myself. I can never possess either while I stay here. I am nothing but a household drudge, and see no prospect of ever being anything else. Oh, if the farm would only educate its children instead of crushing the life out of them like

the wheel of Juggernaut's car! I shall never be able to make anything of my life. I shall die a nobody."

She wrung her hands with despair and sobbed. Her future had never looked so nearly hopeless.

"If I only didn't *care*," she thought. "A good many people don't care to make any particular stir in the world. Some girls would even be glad to escape penury by marrying Mr. Markley; but he's worse than the poor-house."

She shuddered.

"Lele would help me if she could, but she can't." Jen's thoughts rambled on: "It wouldn't be right to *let* her do it. If I only had not quit school so soon, I might get a certificate and teach school to get a start on my musical education. But as it is, I couldn't make even a license. I seem to have darned and patched and boiled and baked all the knowledge out of my skull. The 'Woman with the Rolling-pin' is just about on a level with the 'Man with the Hoe.' Neither has time to cultivate any part of the human being that is not material. The mind shrinks and dries up like toasted bread before the fire. Poor farmers and their families have no use for intellect. They ought to be born with just enough vitality to keep them at work, but not enough to make them conscious of their misery."

She sat down on the stile again and began to sing a little love song that she had learned from her mother, who was also gifted in music. The air was yet vibrating with her pure notes, when a hand was lightly

pressed over her eyes, and a merry voice exclaimed:

"Like an enchanted boat
My soul in ecstasy doth float
Upon the waves of her sweet singing."

Jennie sprang up, very white for a moment, and then stormily flushed:

"Ward! how did *you* get here?"

"I was out squirrel-hunting. Didn't expect to find a nightingale at this hour."

"I did not know you ever hunted here," said Jennie, gravely. "Allow me to say good-evening."

"And leave me alone after I've scrambled through seas of briars to join you? I rather guess not! Why, in heaven's name, when you sing so divinely, do you sit mute through all that tinny song service at Bethany?"

"I fear it would not increase the harmony."

"Probably not. You would be picked to pieces by a few jealous nobodies." He sat down and motioned her to a place by his side. "Repeat that song for me, Jennie, will you?"

"You have heard me sing at home, often," said Jennie, "and if you will come"—

"Oh, I dare not. Think on that bloomin' racket 'twixt my revered parent and your tender-hearted brother."

"What racket? I did not know of any quarrel."

"I had forgotten that Syd doesn't chatter *all* of his troubles in the ear of his devoted family as I do. Well, Jinsey, the fact is, Collins Pater came home last

evening stumbling with wrath after a row with Syd, who it seems had boiled over at last — I wonder it didn't happen long ago — and vowed to exterminate the whole or any part of the Collins tribe at sight the first time they appeared on this side the line. I got a hearty blowing up, myself, on the strength of it, I promise you. Am bound by all sorts of oaths not to set my foot on the Fairfax farm before the middle of September."

"Then why are you here?" asked Jennie, with asperity.

"It was a one-sided article, Jinsey. Daddy-kins swore all the oaths and I only laughed, not loud but deep, especially when he warned me to look for a wife in some other direction."

Jennie rose, her heart beating fast, and confronted him with flashing eyes:

"Give me my bonnet, Ward," she said, holding out a hand for the captured article.

"And leave me — what?" he asked, detaining her.

"Solitude?"

"I don't enjoy it."

"'The wise,' 'tis said, 'are never less alone than when alone.'"

"I don't pretend to be wise, Jinsey, and I positively hate to be alone. I wonder you would think of coming here all by your little self."

"I come here often to practice singing, as it is the only place I have ever found where there is, or *has been*, no danger of being interrupted."

"You have been here hundreds of times, perhaps, and never had an auditor till now?"

"Yes."

"I call that a waste of good material. Let me be the audience after this."

"I think not, Ward," said Jennie, candidly. "Syd wouldn't like it."

"Probably not, since he's at the outs with the Collinses generally. You needn't let him know anything about it."

"I've always considered Syd's preferences."

"I thought there was a tide in the affairs of girls when somebody else's brother was the first to be considered."

"Even if he didn't care, I would far rather see you at home than here. You'll be there anyhow before to-morrow night — to see Lele," she added.

"No, I won't. We've quit."

"That's a hackneyed phrase with you — about girls."

"It's true as gospel this time. Lele and Daddykins both have their faces set against me for Syd's stepbrother. I'm just as free as air, Jennie, and I'm coming out here to-morrow evening to see you."

"It wouldn't be right," said Jennie, reddening. But, oh, how she wished that it *was* right.

"Jean, you haven't a particle of romance about you."

"It is not a question of romance, Ward."

"You clearly don't care a straw whether I'm

pleased or not," said Ward, in an injured tone. "I thought once that you — liked me."

The girl's cheeks crimsoned.

"Are we — friends,— Jinsey?"

"We are not enemies, I hope," said Jean.

"It seems to me half the time that we are."

A passionate denial rose to her lips, but she repressed it. To-morrow she would be glad to remember that no foolish, sentimental words had passed between herself and Ward. Again she held out her hand for the sunbonnet, which Ward still held.

"Well, I shall give you your bonnet, Jinsey," he said, after demurring a while, "on one condition."

"And that?"

"You must give me — a kiss."

Jennie's eyes flashed wide and dark under their heavy lashes. Ward felt as far from comprehending the soul that looked out of those wonderful eyes as he was from being able to make love in Hindoostanee. But he had sense enough not to repeat his request. He gave her back her bonnet in silence. She took it with an offended air, but repented a little and turned back as she was leaving him.

"Good-bye, Ward," she said; but Ward had turned suddenly sulky and did not hear. "What have I done?" asked Jennie.

"What have *I* done?" repeated Ward, in an injured tone.

"Why must you always talk nonsense?" asked Jennie, reproachfully.

"Confound it, Jennie, a fellow never knows what to say to you. It will be a lucky man that finds the right road to that heart of yours."

Jennie had put on her sunbonnet. It was white, with a wide frill of embroidery and a blue lining. Jennie's dark, bright face looked more attractive under it than he had ever in his life remembered it.

"What has come to Jen of late?" he thought. "Her eyes would make the fortune of any artist capable of painting them."

Obeying a sudden impulse, which a man less weak would have resisted, he took both her hands in his and exclaimed:

"Jinsey, you know how well I used to like you. Sit down and tell me why you've treated me so badly of late."

"I'm sorry if I did," said Jennie, with quivering lips. "I couldn't help it, Ward."

"Do you want to make it up once for all, Jinsey?"

His tone had grown tender. Jennie faltered "Yes," and the next moment was in his arms, her long lashes drooping against cheeks that his lips had touched as with fire.

Ward did more serious thinking in the next thirty seconds than he had ever done in any previous thirty minutes in his life. It was simply impossible to look into Jen's eyes without knowing how entirely her heart was his, how true she had been to her childish vows. Why had he gone so far in making light love to a serious girl like Jennie?

"What am I to do to get out of this?" he groaned inwardly. "I never dreamt it as a proposal. If poor Jinks had ever been in society, she would know that a fellow *never* means half what he says, and that kisses don't count as much as engagement rings."

He suddenly discovered that he was late to supper, and that his mother, apprehensive that he had shot himself instead of a squirrel, would be sending out a searching party.

"But to-morrow evening at this hour I will see you again," he added.

Disappointment and doubt began to conflict with Jennie's faith in her childhood lover. She experienced, too, feelings of anger that he should expect her to meet him clandestinely.

"You don't want to meet me — here?" she faltered.

"I can't come to your house just at present," said Ward, evasively. "Syd and Daddykins would combine to break up the meeting. But I can see you here"—

"No, Ward, you can not!" cried Jennie, her anger suddenly flashing up. "I don't care to entertain young men who do not respect me enough to come to my home to visit me."

"All right," said Ward, outwardly angry, though inwardly glad; "no use to be on friendly terms with you, I see. A girl that has no more confidence in a fellow than you have in me shouldn't trust herself in his company anywhere." ("That sounds well," he

reflected, "and there's more truth in it than I usually put in my sentences.")

"But, Ward"—

"I mean just that," repeated Ward; "it is quite as much the thing to see me here as in your step-father's house — having known each other all our lives, as we have."

"It doesn't seem so to me."

"I try to be a gentleman everywhere, and I think you've always known it. But there's no use for us to try to get on together. We can't, so we might as well stop trying."

"Yes," said Jennie, realizing for the first time how a drowning person feels when he catches his last glimpse of the green hills by the river-side.

"I wish you good-evening, Jennie, and sincerely apologize if I have offended you."

"Good evening, and — good-bye!"

Jean spoke the words mechanically, her eyes full of regret and longing. Ward turned to go, but looked back indecisively, and his face softened.

"*Is* it good-bye?" he asked, in a winsome undertone.

"If she stays now, it will be on a different footing," he thought. "I wish she *would* stay."

"If you can not come to our house — yes!" said Jean, firmly.

"It's just obstinacy, Jinsey."

"It's just because I won't do what I think wrong even to please you, Ward."

"I'm sorry I ever asked you, then, if that's the way you look at it. Good-bye, Jennie."

"Good-bye, Ward."

* * * * * * *

The next afternoon Ward was lying on the parlor sofa, with the blinds drawn to exclude the sun, when Keith Hubbard chanced to call.

"Oh, stay out of here," he cried, fretfully, when the parlor door opened. "Beg pardon, Keith. I thought it was Roy, and I can't have him in here. My head aches to distraction. Have the kindness to lock the door, will you?"

"What ails you, Polly? You look knocked up."

"I'm in a confounded scrape, that's what," said Ward, pounding Trix's miracle of art — the sofa pillow. "I've thought and thought till I'm sick of thinking, and I can't see my way out of it."

"A queer thing to happen to Ward Collins, I must say. Better 'fess up, and if there's a way out, I'll help you."

"I've made a fool of myself, Keith — such a *blamed* fool."

And with great frankness he related what had passed between himself and Jennie.

"Keith, I hope I may *die* if I had the remotest idea of making serious love to her,' he added.

"Why not write and make it up?"

"Make it up, the dickens! When I'm dead in love with her fascinating step-sister? That was really why I couldn't go to the house to see Jen. I had studied

it all out, and Lele suited me better for a wife than any girl I ever saw. So I had just made up my mind 'to put it to the test and win or lose' Miss Fairfax, when I got my foot into it with Jen, and I don't know how to get it out."

"Kick yourself a few times when you do," suggested Keith.

"I've done that already, but it doesn't help matters at all. I've made a true-hearted girl believe I'm in love with her when I'm not — much." He tore his hair and groaned, which made Keith laugh.

"You don't know now whether you are, or not," he said, jeeringly.

"I tell you, Hubby, I shan't forget the look in Jen's eyes when we parted if I live a hundred years. And to think I've got to meet her every time I call on Lele, and know she considers me a regular scamp! I wish I had shot myself while out squirrel-hunting. I do indeed."

Keith reflected.

"You can meet Lele at entertainments for a while instead of her home," he said, presently. "I'll get up a few for your especial benefit. In this way you will scarcely see Jennie. She hardly ever goes anywhere. And when you do see her, it would be best to act just as usual. I can't see that you compromised yourself much."

"I didn't say much, and I didn't mean much," Ward replied, "but — I kissed her."

"It wasn't the first time, I suppose. And besides,

where would you be if you were called to account for all your kisses?"

"Jen is so different from other girls, Hubby, *so* different. She's unique in that she knows neither how to deceive or take deceit. I made her admit with her eyes"—

"Polly, what if Syd knew that you were chattering all this stuff about Jen?"

"I don't suppose you'll have the cheek to run over and tell him."

"No; but a good many fellows would."

"You know I can't live without a confidant of some kind."

"No; if you were a hen-pecked husband, you'd chatter your troubles in the ear of the public. I warn you right now that I won't be in the mix-up."

"'No cause to be afeared' as yet. If I could exchange tongues with some butter-woman, I'd be a single man for years yet."

"But, if not, you're liable to come home married almost any day. Or what is worse — engaged to the wrong girl. I'm getting out of patience with you."

"Going to throw up your job as adviser, are you? I don't much care, since you've taken out your license; only I don't know where I can better myself, for Morris is no good since I'm out with Maud, and Ol Stuart's mother with her purity pledges and missionary boxes and temperance tracts, is enough to keep any young man from *his* roof. I wonder you ever go there. Even if Alice were talkative, her virtuous mother

would repel more beaux than she could ever attract."

"License?" interrogated Keith, catching at the one word in the whole harangue that interested him.

"To preach, I mean. When you get down to cut and dried sermons, I'm out — with Betsy."

"Fact is, Polly, you've got about to where you'd *better* listen to preaching. You've done some shabby things in your time, old fellow; like when Syd was trusting you as he would a brother, and you trying all the time to cut him out."

"I wasn't trying, Hubby, really. But I just found that I could — if I didn't resist much. Resistance never was a failing with me."

"Nor a virtue, either. You ought to thank your stars that you had Syd to keep you straight as long as you did."

"And that I've still got you," laughed Ward.

"You surely ought to learn to stand alone some time. If you keep on sliding"—

"I've always found sliding very pleasant; and as for scrapes — this is about the worst one I ever got into, and it isn't serious I guess. Still I do wish it hadn't happened. *I'm afraid she'll tell Lele!*"

CHAPTER XXI.

"Till the First of September."

Ward had miscalculated the loyalty of his old playmate, for Jean would never have dreamed of "telling Lele." What mental tortures she endured during the succeeding days, none ever suspected—not even Ward, whom with the curious inconsistency of her passionate nature, she never blamed. That she might have won the only man she had ever loved by resorting to that doubtful expedient — a clandestine courtship — she did not doubt. Many a romantic girl would have counted the chance of happiness which she had relinquished, as one of her choicest blessings. To be sure, it was but one in ten in her favor, but what girl of eighteen ever sits down to calculate upon the adverse chances in a love affair?

The only thing that caused her to act in the matter as she did was the principle instilled by her Christian mother — that one's self-respect is to be maintained at all hazards. She felt that Ward himself would not long have respected her did she consent to do what her own conscience pronounced doubtful. And she was right.

The loss of a fickle lover is by no means the greatest that a girl can sustain.

Jean had the courage and pride that belong to high-strung, sensitive natures; and she would have suffered all the tortures of the rack before she would have let Ward see how sore had been her disappointment. For one happy moment she had thought he really loved her. The old apple-tree in the orchard was her only confidant, and this faithful friend kept her secret well.

If her depression of spirit was noticed, she stoutly averred that it was the mortgage alone which was to blame; a statement that was fully confirmed, so far as Ward was concerned, by her manner toward that young gentleman when, after a few days, he came to call on Lele again. Jean seemed to have forgotten all that had transpired at the stile, and treated him much as any other girl would have treated a friend and neighbor. She was learning at last to conceal her real feelings.

Ward, though immensely relieved at her philosophical way of accepting the situation, was puzzled. He never had been able to comprehend Jean's contradictory moods, and he often said "she was queerer than the queerest girl in Germany." Everything had conspired to separate him from his old playmate, Jen's temper being no small factor; and at this time — as it happened — he imagined himself absorbingly in love with Lele.

"Tell you what, Hubby," he said, in one of his confidential chats with Keith, "if ever a fellow was *glad* of anything, I am that Jen had the sense and principle to put her foot down on meeting me at that stile.

With those black eyes of hers she might have cajoled me into a runaway marriage right on the eve of a wedding with my little heiress!"

"There's nothing impossible where you are concerned," said Keith, drily.

"You mean I'm not much to be depended upon, eh?"

"Not much, except to look out for number one, like your old dad."

"Confound you, Hub! When did I ever outrage the proprieties?"

"Never had a good chance, or you would. You need a good, high-principled wife, if ever a fellow did."

"Lele Fairfax would about fill the bill, I guess."

"I wouldn't bank much on Miss Fairfax, Polly."

"You *wouldn't?* I wonder why."

"It's my opinion she doesn't care the snap of a whip about you. She sees through you better than Jen does."

"Thanks!"

"Better give her up. A marriage with Jen is about the only thing that will ever make a man of you."

"Well, Hub, I shouldn't wonder if you are right. But you can't think what a de'il of a shindy the old man would kick up if he knew I contemplated such a thing!"

* * * * * * *

Syd was sitting moody, silent and alone on the veranda. The day had been a miserable one for him, owing partly to a hot argument with Mr. Fairfax; but

he could have found some comfort in sitting under the honeysuckles, hearing the girls sing and play, if Ward Collins had kindly stayed at home. But Ward, in those days, would, as he confided to Keith, "have gone past dragons and through fire" for a glimpse of his best and latest girl; he was not, therefore, likely to be detained at home by either Trix's scoffs, or fear of Syd's or his father's displeasure, or yet by any sensitive scruples concerning what Jennie might say or think.

"But if I were not so gone on Lele, I half believe I should lose myself to Jen, Keith," he said to his confidant on his way over there this evening. "Her eyes sink into a fellow's very soul."

"And Lele," began Keith, jestingly.

"Don't *you* call her Lele, Hubby; that's bad enough for me to do. And by the way, old man, I guess I could depend upon you for my *best* in case of emergency, eh?"

"Rather; I should say I had promised to officiate in that capacity on half a dozen different occasions; but the ceremony never comes off, does it?"

Their roads parted here.

"Bye-bye," called Ward very softly after his departing friend. "Kiss Maud for me once, won't you, Hubby?" And turning in at the Fairfax gate, he presently stumbled over Syd sitting in the dark on the veranda.

"Beg pardon, Syd," he said, in his boyish way, "but you *are* a fry to mope out here when you might

just as well be in the parlor having your bit of fun. Come along, won't you?"

"Not to-night," said Syd, stiffly, and sauntered down the avenue toward the gate. Ward's light laugh pursued him.

"Confound him!" he muttered, putting his hands over his ears with a shudder. "I wonder how I ever could have liked Ward. That laugh of his rings in my ears for hours after I see him. It's simply maddening."

He gazed up and down the long, winding road, and across the fields toward St. John's, shuddering again as he heard the tinkle of Maud's piano. He wondered if Maud, too, would contrive to happen in while Ward was here, as she had done several times before. Twilight deepened. There was a cloud in the west that rolled itself across the sky until it swallowed up nearly all the stars. Syd prayed for rain, but without much faith. It *never* rained when you wanted it, and when you were perishing for a little sunshine, the rain poured in bucketfuls, regardless of prayer.

A light glimmered in the parlor window at St. John's, then disappeared and shone again from an upper window. Syd wondered if Maud were not getting ready for a drive with Keith Hubbard, and whether she would venture to hold the lines again. He felt in a contemptuous, sneering mood to-night. Things had gone so sadly wrong that day. Crops were not improving; indeed, they were growing daily more unpromising. In the tobacco patch there seemed to

be at least *one* worm for every leaf; and thrashing was at hand. He wondered what would become of the worms while he was "changing hands." It usually took about two weeks, but would take less time this year: the fly had damaged his wheat considerably. And he had confidently counted on a big harvest to help him out with the interest money!

Syd stood under the vine-covered gateway at the foot of the lawn, leaning on the gate in grim, discouraged silence. How he wished for his old-time faith in Ward, and Maud, and everybody! It was so distressing to degenerate into a cynic, with a sneer for everybody and everything. Syd had not expected to develop into that unpleasant type of human nature.

He was so busy with his thoughts that he did not notice the approach of Ward and Lele until they had nearly reached the gate. He had barely time to step out of their way, for he was in no mood to join their laughing chat. Before he could slip away unseen, he heard Ward half declare his love to Lele, and with the amazing assurance that characterized that volatile gentleman, impress a swiftly stolen kiss upon her lips.

Lele indignantly repulsed him.

"How *dare* you?" she cried. "I deserve this, perhaps, for my imprudence in coming down here with you at this hour. In future I shall be wiser. Let me bid you good-night."

Ward detained her as she was running away.

"Oh, don't leave me, Miss Fairfax — Lele, darling — I love you. Don't you understand? I hope I may

die if I am deceiving you. Listen to me, Lele, I'm desperately in earnest."

"I expect," said Lele, with a nervous laugh, "to hear Maud St. John repeat this whole scene to-morrow night."

"By Jove! what do you take me for?" cried Ward, deeply mortified.

"I take you to be very much in fun," said Lele, recovering her good humor.

"I swear I'm in the deadest kind of earnest," declared Ward, getting to where laughter was "no good."

"You had no right to kiss me," said Lele. "I don't like such fun."

"But it wasn't fun, Miss Fairfax. *Do* believe me when I say that I never meant to offend you."

"You are incapable of loving me or any girl," she said. "Your love-making is all put on."

For the first time in his life Ward began to tremble in his shoes at the prospect of getting an out-and-out refusal.

"Oh, don't, Lele," cried he in a tone of abject misery. "I've made a fool of myself by speaking too soon. Give me till the first of September to retrieve myself."

"It would be useless."

"I won't take a positive 'No'" he cried. "I can't bear it. Think how I love you!"

"But I don't love you, and I never can," said Lele, candidly. "I must look up to the man I am to marry.

I must feel that he is stronger than I. I can never feel so toward you."

"Jen and Syd have prejudiced you against me," said Ward, feeling that he deserved little mercy at the hands of Jean and her bother.

"Mr. Collins, you are greatly mistaken. Neither of them ever tried to influence me against you."

Ward was silent a moment; then he said:

"Lele, I hate to mention it, but if you don't care particularly for any other fellow, I should think it strange you would throw away such a good chance to save your father's home."

"You mean"— Lele began falteringly, and stopped.

"I mean that my father is determined to sell him out in September, and that is the reason I spoke so soon. The place, if he gets it, is to be my share of the estate; and you could buy it in and give it to Syd or any of your folks to keep. My grandfather left me enough to buy a good farm, and stock it, too. I don't want you for your money, and I don't care a continental *what* you do with it, so you give me yourself."

Lele seemed petrified. She did not speak for so long a time that it seemed to Syd in his involuntary ambush that he should die of that pain in his heart if she did not answer soon. Twenty times he felt that she was on the verge of a sacrificial acceptance. Ward far less impatiently awaited her reply. He knew he had played his best card last. Syd knew it, too, and trembled as with a chill. Oh, that silence! And

how Maud's piano tinkled through it all, like a grating laugh. The light had returned to the parlor. Syd wondered why Maud's movements had so totally ceased to interest him. He had so far lost faith in her that it would not now have pained him to see her married to Ward; but the thought of giving Lele up to his old rival pierced his heart with the keenest pain he had experienced since his mother's death. It was as though all the comfort and solace that had come into his dreary life were suddenly to be snatched away.

"I'm afraid I've shocked you," said Ward at last. "But, Lele, darling, don't think I'm posing as the villain in the cheap novel. I'm not, by Jove! But I'm perfectly powerless to help you or yours unless we're engaged. I could do a great deal for you then. And I give you my word of honor not to interfere if you buy the land and give it back to your father. He's getting old, and it would break his heart to lose it."

Lele sighed deeply and stared at the dim, dusty road and the clover-scented meadows beyond, sparkling with fireflies. Along the southern horizon great stars were shining, as yet untouched by the advancing storm cloud.

"Lele, why don't you speak to me?" cried Ward, in tones of melting entreaty. "What! Crying? I'm a confounded fool to make you feel so." His arm stole around her. "Oh, dearest, let me comfort you. Can't you trust me and love me a little, sweetheart?"

"Have the goodness not to touch me," said Lele, haughtily.

"You positively hate me, I believe," said Ward, amazed.

"No, I like you very much when you act sensibly. But I can't bear — this sort of thing."

"Don't you ever expect to be loved and caressed by some lucky fellow?"

"I wish you could know how distasteful this conversation is to me," said Lele.

"You have made me love you," cried impetuous Ward. "And now you are so heartless that you wouldn't even marry me to save your father's home."

"I'm not heartless," said Lele, with a sob.

Ward repented.

"Miss Fairfax, forgive me. I didn't mean it. You're the sweetest girl I ever saw, and if you could care for me as I do for you, I'd be the happiest fellow on this green earth. But remember, I'll do the best I can for your folks, anyway."

"Thank you; that is kind," Lele contrived to say unsteadily; "but I do not think anything can make a difference in my answer. I have no moral right to marry you just to save my old home."

"You'll leave it unsettled, though, for the present?" he pleaded.

"Yes, if you like; but my heart tells me it is as much settled as it will ever be," she said, with a sigh.

"If you weren't so steeled against me I am sure I could make you love me in time," said Ward, in his most winsome tones.

"It is not that," said Lele. "You will see yourself,

when you come to know me better, that we are totally unsuited to each other."

"Perhaps when you know *me* better you will change your mind," said Ward, hopefully.

A few minutes later Syd heard buggy wheels rolling swiftly down the pike. Far in the distance he could still hear the hoof-beats of Di and Venus in perfect accord. Lele had disappeared up the avenue, and when the forerunner of a summer storm began to toss the highest boughs of the elm trees, Syd also retraced his steps to the house. Thunder was booming in the distance and the last star had fled. A few large drops of rain fell.

"If we can only have a shower!" thought Syd. "The atmosphere already seems clearer."

He went into the hall with an elastic step. Lele came running down the stairs with an anxious look on her face.

"Oh, Syd, I didn't know there was going to be a storm!" she said, tremulously.

"There isn't," replied Syd, tranquilly.

"But listen how the wind blows, and the thunder is getting closer," cried Lele, in terror, as a furious gust shook the house and red lightning gleamed at the windows.

Syd went into the parlor, and after a struggle with the wind, closed the shutters. Then he seated himself by Lele on the sofa and took her hand. Instantly she flushed crimson.

"You don't like — this sort of thing?" he asked her teasingly.

"You were at the gate just now?" she questioned, half angrily.

"I was there when you came, and couldn't get away," he confessed, with unfeigned humility. "I heard every word."

"And, like Charlie"—

"Unlike Charlie, I shall never mention it again."

"You don't think I did wrong, do you?"

"*Wrong?*"

A crash of thunder shook the old house to its foundations. Lele retreated to the only place of safety she knew, Syd's arms, and thereby gave him the impression that thunder storms were made in heaven for the express use of tongue-tied lovers.

"Didn't the lightning strike somewhere near?" she asked, in terror-stricken tones, but making a dignified effort to appear brave.

"I guess not," said Syd, reassuringly. Ordinarily he was the first at the window to see what effect, if any, the bolt had had on the barn. All his wheat and clover were stored there now, but he never stirred. More wheat and clover would grow, but two such precious experiences as this, which had suddenly come to him, might not happen in a lifetime. He accounted every second that that girlish head reposed on his shoulder of priceless worth. For once he could have the supreme satisfaction of pitying Ward. She had repulsed *him*. Meanwhile Syd hailed anything short

of a cyclone as the greatest blessing of his life. A very brief blessing, however. In a few moments the wind lulled. The thunder, too, rolled less ominously, and Lele's courage returned.

And now, too, Jennie's excited voice was heard calling them in the hall.

"I just bet they're out takin' a walk an' have been thunderbolted," sobbed Tude.

"Tude, you ought to be a woman's rights politician," said Charlie's teasing voice. "You beat the nabobs for combining impossibilities."

"I don't know what you mean, I'm sure," said Tude.

"Why, if they've been thunderbolted, how *can* they be taking a walk?" quizzed Charlie.

"I knowed something would happen to somebody when you brought that hoe in the house," said Cora to Charlie. "It never fails to bring bad luck."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Charlie.

"I don't believe you'd *care*."

"Well, I've been wanting to go somewhere ever since I've got my new suit," said Charlie. "An' a funeral's about the only chance for a kid of my size to show a new suit on Bethany Ridge."

Lele and Syd caught, through the half-open parlor door, snatches of this colloquy in the hall, and it brought both of them back to a realizing sense of their situation. Moreover, the thunder was rolling so far in the distance that there was not the slightest excuse for further timidity; even the rain was ceasing. Only the

edge of the storm had visited Fairfax Farm, and no good would accrue to the crops, after all. But Syd, for once, was not disposed to quarrel with the weather.

* * * * * *

Mr. Fairfax came bustling into the parlor a moment later, and looked hurriedly about him with a glance of real anxiety.

"I thought I heard them come in," he said, and at the same time caught sight of Syd and Lele sitting decorously on the sofa, but with eyes glowing with suppressed laughter.

"Not thunderbolted yet!" said Lele, radiant with the mere joy of living and loving. Syd looked down at her with a half smile that told his keen-witted step-father more than he would have been willing to reveal.

"It's all right," said Mr. Fairfax, cheerfully, and as Jennie and the children came in he withdrew to his own room.

"I'm thankful it *is* all right," he thought. "I guess the mortgage will be lifted without difficulty. Inviting Lele home was a real stroke of genius!"

* * * * * *

Ward reached home before the storm broke. To his surprise he found Keith Hubbard in the parlor, tuning his violin.

"Hello, Hub! I thought you were at Maud's," was his greeting.

"She has a fellow out from Lansing," said Keith, in very low spirits. "The game's up with me, Polly."

"Same here! Don't play, Hubby, I'm 'dreffful low down.'"

"Actually been given the mitten?"

"Precious close to it. And, Hubby, I wonder if the girls feel half as bad when they lose us as we do when we lose them."

"Worse, Polly, I've no doubt."

"Then I'll never flirt again."

CHAPTER XXII.

A Set-to and a Set-back.

Old Heldt came the next morning a little earlier than usual with his cattle complaints, and he was in a towering passion this time. The wind last night had blown down some portion of the division fence, and all of the Fairfax stock had roamed at will for hours over the Heldt farm.

"Ife got dem sthocks benned oop," he added, shaking his fist under Syd's nose, "und you gids none off dem home undil you bays me dwenty-fife tollar *town.*"

"Twenty-five fiddlesticks!' said Syd, contemptuously. "I'll do nothing of the kind."

Heldt became perfectly inarticulate in English and lapsed into Dutch oaths.

"It wasn't *my* fault that the wind blew the fence down," Syd added.

"I wants my dwenty-fife tollar," shouted Heldt.

"I haven't got the money," said Syd, beginning to be very angry, "and you shouldn't have it if I had."

"You can get der money from yer sthep-seester," said Heldt. "I hear you'fe gongluded to marry her, anyhow. Petter be soon — 'fore you're sold under t'e hammer," he added, sneeringly.

"Save your slurs," cried Syd. "Who has the impu-

dence to invent such a lie?" he added, angrily, when he thought of Lele.

Ed was coming down the lane with a hoe over his shoulder, but Syd didn't notice his approach. He was "too mad to see straight," but not so mad as he became a moment later.

"Vy, eferybody," Heldt said in answer to his question. "It's t'e talk off t'e Reedge. Dey say you air goin' t' buy in t'e ole man's blace mit Lele's money *ride* away."

Syd now saw Ed standing by Heldt, eyeing his step-brother suspiciously.

"Are you?" he asked.

"No!" cried Syd, vehemently. "It's a lie, and here's something to nail it!"

He struck straight out from the shoulder, and the Dutchman, heavy and strong as he was, went down under a blow that would have staggered an ox.

"Good heavens, Syd! you've finished him," exclaimed Ed.

"I guess not," Syd replied, coolly, and stood with folded arms waiting for his opponent to rise. Heldt scrambled to his feet, purple with rage.

"Coome oud in der peeg road und fide mit me like ein man!" he shouted. "Ife been ripe for ein fide mit you t'is long time."

"I thought so," Syd replied, pulling off his jacket. "Come on; I'm just as ready for a fight as you are."

Tude and Cora ran after the two men, their hair streaming on the wind.

"Oh, Syd, don't fight! Ed, don't let them kill each other!" they screamed in chorus.

"Shut up, and go back to the house!" said Syd, turning upon them a face like that of the Iron Duke. The two girls fell back terror-stricken.

"Go to the house, I say!" thundered Syd. Cora and Tude retreated as rapidly as they had approached. Tude confided to Jennie afterward:

"I never was so *scared* in all my life. And Cora never was, either. Syd looked *awful.*"

Syd walked down the lane with long, swift strides, and flung open the gate for the panting Dutchman to pass through. Bloated with beer and winded already from his fall, Heldt felt himself no match in a fair fight with the muscular young fellow before him. He whipped out a big bowie-knife.

"Not fair, not fair!" Ed sang out, interposing his hoe between them. "Fist fight or none."

"Gol darn you!" said Heldt, looking suspiciously from one to the other. "Haf I got to settle mit both off you scubbs?"

"No," said Syd, making Ed stand aside; "but I'm not going to be drawn and quartered by a Dutch butcher when I'm not armed."

And with a dextrous movement of the hoe, which he had snatched from Ed, he sent the knife spinning into the long grass by the roadside. Heldt regarded his skillful maneuver with bulging eyes, and his ardor cooled, now that his knife was gone.

"Coome, now, Seet, mine claims is joost, ain't dey?" he asked, in much milder tones.

"All just claims will be settled in time, as you know," said Syd. "But when you come here insulting my step-sister — that's something to be settled *now*. Are you ready?"

"Yah," said Heldt, laboriously divesting himself of his plaid gingham working jacket and handing it to Ed, who stood ready, as he declared, "to see that there was to be no funking on either side." Then "screwing his courage to the striking point," Heldt made a run at Syd. He was met by a blow full in the forehead that sent him rolling in the dust. Syd waited with folded arms for his enemy to recover his equilibrium. In a moment the Dutchman renewed the conflict, flying at Syd's throat like a huge bull-dog. With remarkable agility Syd eluded his grasp, and adding a few pounds to the momentum already gained by the Dutchman in making the attack, Syd hurled him from him with force enough to send him *kersplash* into a ditch filled with stagnant water by the roadside. Heldt raised his head, snorting like a rhinoceros, while Ed, who had just sufficient sense of humor to see the fun in a fight, held his sides with laughter.

Heldt rolled from the mud into the dust, and hesitating to rise, stared panic-stricken at his cool antagonist.

"Py sheeminy, t'is is no fair fight," he growled.

"Get up and fight, then, you awkward booger," said Syd, contemptuously.

"Gid oop? T'ere's no use t' gid oop!" whimpered the Dutchman. "You haf learned the drick off strikin' like lightnin'. How'd I know you'd been bractisin' mid san'bags all summer?"

"I haven't," said Syd. "You don't want to fight. Get up, old Beer-keg, and apologize for your insults and go home."

Heldt got up with some difficulty, mopped his streaming countenance, and proceeded to apologize.

"Now go over to that infernal old sheep-trap of yours and bring my stock home," commanded Syd. "And if you come here with any more of your insults, remember, this isn't a circumstance to what you'll get!"

"I only repeaded about your sthep-seester what I haf hearn tell from *feefty* beoples," snuffled Heldt.

"Go tell them they're every one a blasted set of liars," shouted Syd. "The heavens will fall before *I* buy this farm or any other with Lele Fairfax's money."

"Huh!" said Heldt, in a tone not calculated to soothe, as he was leaving. Syd caught him by the collar and shook him like a rat.

"Now look here," he said, in that even tone which had been known to subdue even Jennie in her worst moods; "you'll not move a step until you've promised me that you'll knock the teeth down the throat of the first fellow who dares to mention in your presence that I have any designs on Lele's money. You hear?"

"Yah, yah!" gasped the choking sufferer.

"See you don't forget it, then," said Syd, relaxing his hold.

"All ride, all ride," said Heldt, grabbing for his jacket and hat. "Und if I effer set foot on t'is blace again, you may shoot me for a rabbit."

"I don't think we should miss it much," said Syd, turning on his heel. Heldt, gesticulating and muttering "Gol darn!" at every step, started for home, leaving his dog, which, probably, through loyalty to its master, had been having quite a row with Clem's pup. Syd gave the creature an admonitory kick in passing, and it turned on him with a growl.

"Go home!" shouted Syd, in a tone that would have startled a dog of brass.

The next moment something went through the fence like a bullet. It was Heldt's cur, an animal that ever afterward kept a respectful distance between himself and the Fairfax farm.

As for Syd — his day, that had dawned so full of promise, was spoiled. The episode had rendered him uncompanionable to the last degree. And by evening a grim resolve had been formed. Lele, burdened as she was with her troublesome money, was not for *him* — that was certain. The Ridge people must have gossiped horribly, or such a slow coach as old Heldt would never have "caught on." And he had been discussed by a great many people, no doubt — surely not fifty, but enough to convince Syd that he was being ridiculed and condemned by most of the community.

Syd abhorred ridicule above all things, and longed

to be commended, by right-minded people, for doing right. Try as he would he could not imagine a marriage with Lele in any light that seemed commendable.

She would be throwing herself away. And how unwise it must appear, to cooler heads, for a young man to obligate himself to care for a family of his own, when his mother's children were still, and would be for years to come, dependent upon him. He simply could not do it. He must have been mad when he dared think of it last night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Man and the Hoe.

"If it would only, *only* rain!" said Jennie, for the hundredth time.

The drought had lasted so long that her eyes ached as badly as her heart by reason of looking for clouds that never came, or, if they *did* come, ended in sound and bluster, as did the one on the previous night, accompanied by little or no reviving moisture.

By 8 o'clock on the morning succeeding the storm all traces of the night's shower had vanished. The stock penned up by Mr. Heldt had returned to their usual feeding ground.

It had become an added source of discouragement to look each night for a "bank in the west," or at sunrise for the sun "drawing water," in hopes that the long-looked-for rain would materialize.

Jennie had anxiously watched for the new moon as a harbinger of approaching showers; but, no! the silver horn hung straight from its upper point as though nailed to a star, empty as a silver platter. She knew then that little or no rain could be expected during the month — and a prolonged drought at this season meant ruin. As it was, everything was drying up. The pole beans were dying, their blossoms not devel-

cping a single bean. The cucumbers were curling into little yellow crescents, hanging downwards from the vines in ludicrous imitation of the treacherous, disappointing moon. The tomatoes lay sprawling over the ground, with their smooth surfaces blistered and blackened by the torrid sun. In the faint, hot breezes the young corn blades curled and rattled ominously.

Was there ever such an aggravating expanse of cloudless azure? Jennie, sick with foreboding she knew not what result from the foreclosure of the mortgage, worked herself into a mood that made cheerful human companionship unbearable.

"I declare!" she exclaimed, for the hundredth time, "it's perfectly maddening to see all the clouds go by and never a drop of rain for us."

"It rained cats an' dogs at Si Collins's last night," said Charlie, coming in with a rush, impatient for his dinner.

"I shiouldn't wonder," said Jean, enviously. "It always *does,* to hear him tell it. He thinks it will make us feel bad. Who told you?"

"Sam Cahill reported that it rained two brindled cats and one stray dog with a tin-can attachment," said Charlie, seriously, while Cora and Tude laughed.

"I don't call that much of a witticism," said Jennie, crossly.

"I'll admit it was *dry* fun," said Charlie. "Let's have some jam for supper, Jinsey, please."

"Keep still," said Jennie, shortly.

"I'm not cut out for the undertakin' biz," said Charlie.

"You're cut out to be the awfulest nuisance that ever lived," said Jennie.

"I know you would gladly trade me off for the gout if you could," said Charlie. "Tell you what, Jen — suppose you swap me for Mr. Markley. I'll warrant he wouldn't crack *one* joke at your expense in ten years."

Jennie walked disdainfully into the kitchen.

"*He'd* never regret the bargain — *but once!*" said Charlie, *sotto voce.*

"Fretting won't do any good," he presently heard Lele saying, in an effort to cheer Jennie up.

"You never fret, of course."

"Not if I can help it. Jennie dear, don't you think it wrong to worry so much about things you can't help? It's so much easier to do one's duty and leave everything to God. Think how much better it would be to take the weather as it comes, knowing that it is ruled by fixed laws over which our wills and wishes have no power."

"I might if I were an altogether different person, and if the weather had no effect whatever on my bank account. Advice is cheap."

"Going at cost," Charlie interpolated.

"It's something one never gets too little of in this world. It's well there's something plenty and gratis, or I don't know what would become of us poor wretches"—

"Who have lived to be nineteen, goin' on twenty, without getting 'Mrs.' attached to our name," said Charlie, through the keyhole.

Jennie turned angrily away, but Lele took up her cause.

"Don't, Charlie," she said.

"I know she hates to be teased about her age," said Charlie. "You're getting on in years yourself, Lele," he added, turning his guns on her.

"Yes, I'll soon be twenty-one," said Lele, serenely. "Getting to be quite an old maid, you see."

"*You'll* never be an old maid," said Charlie, with conviction. "'You're the sweetest girl in all the world.'" And he went out on the porch singing at the top of his voice snatches of "Paradise Alley" that he thought applicable to Lele.

Jennie felt angry with him, herself and the world in general. If it would only rain, *now* while it would do the crops some good, she felt that she could endure even Charlie better, and Charlie was one of the chief trials of her life. With a great, delightful downpour of rain she felt that she could for once set all ills at defiance, and be for a time, at least, as sweet and sunny as even Lele herself.

Syd ate his dinner in silence. His brow was still contracted. It was evident that the quarrel with Heldt had left him in no gentle mood. There was not so much as a glance for Lele.

A hot, sultry afternoon succeeded. The heat in the sun was intolerable. Even in the great, breezy hall

of the old farmhouse there was little comfort. Cora and Tude were asleep; Mr. Fairfax ditto. The boys were in the fields; Lele was writing letters.

Rain or shine, there were seasons of rest and quiet for every one about the house excepting restless, tireless Jennie. Her mood even now was out of unison with the brooding stillness of the hour. Not a sound broke the hot stillness except the monotonous hum of the sewing-machine, where Jen at a terrific rate of speed was seeking to uncork some of her fiery energy and pent-up discontent. Life was, just now, a very bitter pill to poor Jen.

The clock struck 3. Jennie put her work aside and went out to the field to take the boys a drink. They were resting in the shade, looking limp and worn with fatigue and heat. Syd had thrown himself down on the long grass under a huge walnut tree a little apart from the rest. Jen went to him last and sat down by his side. He was lying face downward, with his head on his folded arms, his hat tossed aside on the daisy-spangled turf. His attitude somehow betokened despondency in an unusual degree.

"Syd, what ails you?" she asked, and her voice sounded as unmusical in her ears as the caw of that crow flying with slow-flapping wings over the distant corn-field. She wondered if this life were real, or only a dream, from which she should presently awaken.

"Syd!" she repeated when there was no reply.

"You're always fancying something," he now replied, curtly. "It's a disagreeable habit."

"Everything I do is disagreeable," said Jennie, sadly. She felt like a hideous blot on the face of Nature, and wished herself dead.

"Jinsey, I didn't mean that, really." He raised himself on one elbow and looked at her not unkindly. "But it's hard enough to keep up appearances at home without being followed to the field and every change of countenance noted."

"And what new troubles have you on your mind?"

"I am not a Catholic, Jennie. I do not require a father-confessor, thank you."

"If it's Lele Fairfax you are grieving over, you might marry *her* any day if it were not for your foolish pride."

"A trite subject — long since worn threadbare. I thought I forebade you mentioning it again."

"There's no use"— began Jennie.

"I beg your pardon, Jean. Will you leave me, or shall I leave you?"

"I shall leave you," said Jean, rising. "But I wouldn't grieve over anybody as you do over her — if I could help myself."

"You don't grieve over anybody, of course."

"Yes, I do," haughtily truthful. "But I can't help myself as you can."

"I guess it would only be pride that would keep either of us silent. It amounts to the same thing." He sprang to his feet and turned to resume his work. "Thank you for bringing the water, Jinsey," he added,

kindly; "but my moods must never be commented on, remember."

Jennie returned slowly to the house, going up through the orchard, where ripe red apples were dropping in the grass, unheeded by the pile of spotted pigs that lay snoozing in the fence corner. Jennie thought they looked very happy. She half wished she were one of them, and could presently be transformed into useful, harmless bacon, instead of growing into hardened, embittered old age, and finally, perhaps, enter into eternal torment. Why were the lower animals exempted from future punishment? Why couldn't they have souls, too? What were souls, anyhow? Jen wished that she had been born a briar or a nettle, instead of an ill-tempered, dissatisfied, ambitious girl, with all the sins of tongue and brain to be atoned for bye-and-bye. If she *must* be a human being, why shouldn't she have been created with Lele's sunny temperament — sweet Lele, who could so completely mask her real feelings under a smiling exterior that even Syd felt convinced that she regarded him as a favorite relative merely, and not as a lover.

A cloud of witnesses could scarce have convinced Jennie that Lele was at that moment almost as miserable as herself.

The variableness of Syd's moods would have puzzled any one; at times they amazed Lele, and never more than the contrast between his manner the previous evening and that of to-day. It really piqued her to

know that a quarrel with an ignorant Pennsylvania Dutch farmer should make Syd so superlatively unapproachable. (She did not know the real cause of the fight.)

"Could I live with a man who gets sulky over things that occur away from home and won't speak when he comes to the house?" she thought. "Ward would never do that, I know."

She abandoned her letter-writing and went out for a walk, going out to the orchard just after Jennie came to the house. Presently she found herself near the barn. The doors stood invitingly open, and white pigeons and swallows were flying in and out. The air was so sweet with the fragrance of clover hay that Lele was tempted to enter and seek to divest her mind of various reflections of a disquieting nature by rummaging for hens' nests in the mows. The search was perfectly bootless, though hens with their heads tilted defiantly back were cackling loudly in the barnyard.

At last, warm and listless, she sat down on one of the low mows to rest and think. Deeper and deeper she sank in the odorous billows of hay, and before she was aware that drowsiness was stealing her senses away, she was in the land of dreams. It seemed that the old log mows, with the oaken threshing floor between, and the dim, black rafters and cooing pigeons overhead, had scarcely faded into visions of gently-flowing brooks, wide meadows and green valleys dotted with milk-white sheep, when she awoke with a start,

to find little Clem sitting beside her, fanning her with his wide straw hat.

"Why, Clem, where did you come from?" she asked, starting up.

"Syd sent me in f'r a hoe. He broke his, 'n if I don't hurry back, he'll give me Hail Columbia."

"Beg pardon," said Lele, with a mystified look.

"Hail Columbia," repeated Clem. "Syd's sharply off on his temper to-day," he added, using one of his father's pet expressions.

"I wonder why." Ah! she *did* wonder why.

"I don't know 'xactly. I think it was his fuss with Heldt. You ought to have seen, Lele, how he wiped up the ground with the old coot. Syd's a customer when he gets waked up that you don't want to fool with mor'n once. He's worse'n Jin. She can waltz all 'round him with her lip, but words don't raise no welts. Dear! There he comes after me. Guess I'll hide in the orchard. I need a few apples to build me up anyhow. It's too tarnation hot to work."

Syd came in with the air of a constable in search of a culprit. With his rough, patched clothes, cowhide shoes and broad-brimmed straw hat, he would have made, just then, a splendid model for a statue of "Toil." The white-robed figure in the hay-mow looked up somewhat apprehensively. He was scowling when he came in, and though he started and changed color, his brow did not unbend at sight of her.

"Where's Clem?" he asked, abruptly. He was

actually afraid to look at Lele, whom he felt he had given up forever. Horses would not have dragged him, unresisting, into her presence just at that time.

"Clem has gone to hide," said Lele, demurely. Syd's brow relaxed as their eyes met, and the magnetism of her presence drew him to her side.

"What's the odds?" he thought. "There's not a cloud in the sky, and I'm insured against everything except thunder storms and gorillas!'

He sat down on the edge of the mow and fanned himself with his hat, fumbling with his collar, which was choking him.

"This infernal weather is killing me," he burst out. "Excuse me, Lele. I'm so cross and irritable that I'm not fit to oversee these troublesome, lazy boys. They have the true philosophy, though, for they see it's no use to do anything this weather, and I — don't. A hoe bounces off the clods like a rubber ball. It's — maddening."

"Things will come out all right, I hope," said Lele.

"No, they won't come out all right," said Syd, with a burning blush. "If I thought they would, I'd hardly be risking a stiff neck in trying to avoid looking at Lele," he thought. "Is there any place she could be where she wouldn't appear sweeter than — oh, hang it! I wish I'd stayed in the field."

"I've been fancying all along that I was keeping myself afloat," Syd remarked aloud, "and that I should finally swim through my sea of troubles, and succeed, as it were, in towing the rest of the family ashore.

By Jove! it would have been easier for Noah to beach the ark. Fancy that old gentleman splashing through the water with the gopher-wood canoe, all humanity and the animal kingdom at his heels, and you'll know just how I feel."

The roof rang with peals of girlish laughter, and Syd felt relieved. It had not, for some time, occurred to him to turn his woes into ridicule. It was safer, when he talked with her, and he wished he could keep it up. But Lele, after laughing a moment, became serious.

"Jokes aside, I know just how you feel, with the drought and all to depress you," said Lele. "I surely ought to find some way to help you"—

"Help me? No! You can't!" A look compounded of shame and anger crossed his face. "Never mention it again."

Lele was a little startled at his vehemence, but she persisted:

"If I can't find a school anywhere, I might open a milliner shop or be a dressmaker," she mused.

"No Fairfax ever did such a thing as that. It couldn't be thought of."

"I'm not one of you, after all," said Lele, wistfully. "I never shall be looked upon as a member of the Fairfax family."

"Not, I trust," said Syd, with drooping head, "until times are different here. You are not like us, Lele. *You* have not been soured and embittered by unsuccessful farming. And you never shall be!"

Lele sat with downcast lashes and fast-beating heart.

Syd had been thinking for hours that he ought to offer some explanation for his lack of discretion during the thunder storm. She ought at least to know how utterly out of the question was matrimony for such as he.

"If I were free to live just as I pleased," he said, "I am sure I should never choose a single life. I am a very domestic character, I think. But life for me, as for so many men who begin with small capitals and large responsibilities, will probably be one continuous struggle, which it would not be right to ask any woman to share. I do not think there can be much brightness in such a future as mine, and if my past is a fair sample of what is to come, I candidly hope it will not last a great many years. We are not put in this world for the mere pleasure that we may get out of life, of course, but to perform some special duty, I suppose. I see clearly what mine is, and none but a coward would try to shirk it. My promise to my dead mother must be kept."

He was half reclining on the log that formed the side of the mow next the threshing-floor, his chin on his hand, the somber, dark-gray eyes uplifted and gazing at her dispassionately.

The flush of coming tears spread over Lele's face.

"Don't cry, Lele. I really can't bear it,' said the big fellow, unsteadily. "But as I've always said, your

happiness depends upon leaving here. You'll be wretched if you stay."

"It won't add any to my happiness to go back to St. Louis."

"I had forgotten Ward," said Syd, biting his lips.

"I detest giggling men, as you know," retorted Lele. "And it would be my greatest pleasure," she added, almost inaudibly, "to keep some people in — a good humor."

Syd grew deadly pale. He realized, as never before, how near she was to him, how easily he might win her. And her money, which he had so coveted, would come to him after all! Everything that now seemed so awry could be righted. He could purchase the farm, run it to suit himself, be prosperous, die a rich man; and with it all he need not break his promise to his mother. Lele would help him in every way. But who would ever believe that he had married her for love? What would Heldt and Ed and everybody think of him? Why, he wouldn't, after the scene he had made this morning, have the respect or confidence of even Teddy Grimes! Marriage with Lele Fairfax was the one thing in the whole category of possibilities that never could become an actual fact. His fight with Heldt had settled that forever. With great bitterness his mind reverted to an implement which seemed to him at that moment a fitting emblem of disappointment and degradation.

"I had forgotten," he exclaimed, starting up as though his work had all along been uppermost on his

mind and must no longer be neglected, "I came for a hoe."

Procuring one in the tool-room at the end of the barn, he came back with a very dogged look on his face.

"Lele, you see this implement," he said, holding the hoe at arm's length. "It is the emblem of a very hard, very discouraging, very narrowing business. I do not think any man with no capital, who expects to make his living by the hoe, has a right to marry."

"And yet you mean to keep on farming!"

"I must, since it is the only trade I have ever had a chance to learn. I used to crave an education that would fit me for a professional life, but lack of funds made it impossible. I know nothing now but how to wield the hoe."

He spoke with great bitterness.

"Don't misunderstand me, Lele," he went on. "It is not farming that I dislike, but *unsuccessful* farming; 'not labor, but the degradation of labor.' I love outdoor life, and especially the free life on the farm with your favorite animals about you. No one loves Nature better than I do, or horses, or the sight of green things growing. I do not think successful farming would be a hard life for any one. It suits me after all, far better than a profession that would keep me indoors. To be a really independent farmer is what I should prefer above everything. And I mean to be one yet, if I live long enough."

He smiled with ill-feigned hopefulness, (which sent

a dagger of pain through his listener's heart,) and swung the hoe over his shoulder. A moment later he was out in the hot sunshine, had crossed the barnyard fence and was going swiftly down the meadow over the crisp, brown stubble. A covey of young quails fled in a dozen directions through the weeds at his approach. Syd neither saw nor heard them. His eyes were full of tears, and it did not cheer him much to know that the girl he had left in the barn was crying, too.

* * * * * * *

The day, which had been so intolerably sultry, drew to a close; and again thunder-heads peered above the horizon and dark clouds began to mount into the serene sky.

"We're going to have rain to-night," said Lele, confidently; "father says the wind is just right for it. And didn't you hear the raincrow this morning?"

"I don't look for any rain," said Jennie, in a discouraged tone.

"Why not?"

"Just because *everybody else hasn't been supplied,*" said Jennie, bitterly. "We never get anything, even rain, unless there's more than enough to go around!"

But about supper-time the rain came sure enough, driving the drenched boys into the kitchen, which was also dripping. The roof, already leaky, had been rendered ten times worse by the protracted drouth. The shingles had been so warped and twisted that the rain

came down in gallons, necessitating the use of pans, kettles and buckets to catch the descending torrent. The water, too, ran down the stove-pipe in a stream, and the wind drove it under the door. To make matters worse, each of the boys had carried in a generous supply of mud on his feet, which mingled with the water on the floor.

Harder and harder poured the rain, as Jennie struggled about among the pans, kettles and restless feet, trying to get supper, for which the hungry boys were clamoring. She did not feel quite so thankful for the rain as she had expected, and everything was conspiring to try her temper.

After the rain she took a half-bushel feed-basket and waded out in search of the young chickens, which, lacking proper shelter, had huddled in wet, shivering heaps at the roots of shrubs and bushes. Many were drowned; the rest Jennie carried in and put into tubs of warm water, where the more hopeful presently revived.

"What a fine rain we have had!" said Lele, assisting her, "and the brightest rainbow I ever saw. Did you notice it?"

"No," said Jennie, shortly. Three of her flood sufferers had just expired.

"*Do* run out and have a glimpse of it while I attend your patients," pleaded Lele.

"Look at a rainbow while my fries are drowning!" exclaimed practical Jennie.

"It would take but a minute, Jennie dear; and Nature is so tranquillizing."

"Well," said Jennie, transferring a dozen of her most hopeful patients to a flannel-lined basket, "if everybody had such a time when it rains as *I* do—what with the leaks and mud and drowned chickens — it would take more than a rainbow to tranquillize 'em, I guess."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Vacant Chair.

"*Isn't* this the sweetest, coolest, most delightful old hall you ever saw!"

Jennie was, as usual, at her mending basket, and Lele looking, as her step-sister thought, "good enough to eat," in her white dress and pink ribbons, was tripping down the stairs.

"It's comfortable enough when there's a breeze," said Jennie, conservatively.

"Comfortable wouldn't spell it," said Lele, with her delicious laugh. "Let me help you, my dear, and let's talk."

"All right. What shall be our subject?" asked Jennie, beginning to brighten up a little.

"'Farming,' said Lele, soberly. "Do you like it?"

"I have my head full of so many things," sighed Jennie, 'that farming too often seems a drag. But if one could have most of the hardest work done, I believe I should not object to a farmer's life. You've got to be mistress of the situation before you can get much pleasure out of it, though."

"Are you always so busy as you have been since I've been here?" asked Lele, thoughtfully.

"Always — except in mid-winter, and it isn't much better then, really, for I have all the sewing and mending to do. From New Year to Christmas I hardly ever see an hour that I can call my own. It is almost out of the question for me to find any time for reading."

"And are most farmers' wives and daughters so busy and so defrauded of leisure time for rest and recreation?"

"I think so. Even Mrs. St. John complains that she is worked to death, and the St. Johns are pretty well heeled."

Lele gazed out of the door absently.

"It doesn't seem the life I should choose," she said, dreamily. "I mean — to be so busy. I would undertake less and so have more leisure to enjoy what I had."

"There is just one continuous round of duties to be performed by somebody. And if you don't keep help, you've got to attend to them yourself."

"I should keep help," said Lele, decidedly.

"Probably *you* might, but I can't afford it, and Cora is so slow and dilatory that she assists me very little. If I live here fifty years, I don't suppose my work will change much."

"But wouldn't love — sweeten labor?" Lele ventured.

"I suppose some kinds might; but playing elder sister to such boys as Ed and Clem and Charlie isn't particularly sweetening."

"Poor, misguided Ed!" sighed Lele. "Can't you help me to win him to better ways, Jennie?"

"I'm afraid not. I never in my life could do anything with him. Have you ever read 'Looking Backward'?"

The conversation drifted to books, and Lele saw for the first time how congenial were their tastes in regard to literature.

"I thought you had no time to read, and that you didn't care for books," said Lele, presently; "but I find you do, after all."

"I do care for them," said Jennie, contritely, "and the only reason I said what I did was because an evil spirit possessed me. I'm so ashamed of the way I've treated you that I can hardly look up sometimes. Instead of doing me any good," she added, with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes, "it only added another to my long list of discomforts. I should be so *much* — I do not say *happier,* but less *unhappy* — if I had always treated you as I should," and two great tears splashed on the torn sleeve she was mending.

"Never mind, Jinsey. Don't mind it, dear," said Lele, going up to Jennie and passing her arm around the girl's neck. "I don't blame you at all for feeling toward me as you did. But I'm more thankful than I can say that the hard feelings are all gone. Jennie, you don't know how empty my heart was when I came here — how I longed for the love of brothers and sisters." The sweet voice faltered, and when she laid

her face against Jennie's there were tears on both their cheeks.

"How you must have felt!" sobbed Jennie.

"I did feel awfully bad," said Lele, making an effort to recover her spirits. "I haven't much ambition or longing for fame, but I wish to be loved. I'd rather have you all love me than be the author of the most popular book ever written."

"Really?" said Jean, quite unconsciously using one of Syd's phrases, and thereby thrilling her auditor's heart to its core.

"Is there anything, next to a hope of heaven, more precious than a h — than domestic happiness?" Lele faltered again. The end of the sentence was almost inaudible. "Nothing," she went on, more audibly, "would make me so happy as to be one of you for life — a real sharer of all your burdens."

"And could you endure to spend the rest of your days on a mortgaged farm?"

"If you all loved and trusted me — yes."

"Lele, we *do* love and trust you — *all* of us!" said Jennie, clinging to her new-found friend.

The two girls with their arms around each other presented a very attractive contrast — one so fair, so delicate in her coloring, so pure in contour and dress; the other dark, glowing and passionate, with a new and wonderful charm in her great, dark eyes and uplifted face.

"Lele, you're the sweetest girl I ever saw," said

Jennie, presently. "No wonder people love you. If you had come to live with us sooner, some of us might have come to be like you, in spite of our troubles. And you've taught me this: that it is woman's best and most natural *right* to be as lovable and attractive as she can, and *not* to repel everybody by fretting and scolding. Oh, how different life might have been for us all the last two years if I had taken mamma's advice and tried to curb my wicked temper. Young as I am, these besetting sins of mine have left marks on my character that no time can ever efface. And all, *all* to no purpose. I can not think of a single cross word or look of mine that did not make matters worse instead of better. Cora is right after all. She will make all the better woman for her easy-going ways. And as for you — everything around you seems full of sunshine. I am only a blot, a shadow, with everything to unlearn."

Her head sank, and the despondent look so characteristic of Syd came into her downcast face. Lele kissed her as much for her brother's sake as for her own, but with a genuine longing to comfort both.

"Don't exaggerate, Jinsey," said she. "I know you've had hard things to endure for one of your progressive nature. On the other hand, I've had my good times, and it won't hurt me to 'rough it' a little. I am not an ambitious person, as you know. I hope to do some good in my humble way, but shall expect to elevate but a small portion of this old globe. You'd lift the whole earth if you could, wouldn't you?"

"I couldn't die in peace unless I had done *something* for the world. I've never had an opportunity yet."

"Is there a greater work than the training of the Nation's sons? Think of the four under this roof whom you may yet influence to become grand men!"

Jennie sighed when she thought how this work had been neglected; until now her influence was worse than nothing with any of them.

"I see at last what a selfish life I have lived," she said. "I was always thinking of myself, never of others; always reflecting on my wasted time, 'on my youth going from me unimproved and joyless'—on my utter inability to obtain an education, or be anything better than a kitchen drudge."

"You are young yet, Jinsey; you shall have opportunities. I'll see that you have."

"No; I'll never have any educational opportunities now," said Jennie, sadly. "I've outlived most of my dreams. I shall"—

"Have lots of happiness yet, Jinsey. Let me see your hand. Just as I thought—a triple bracelet! Why, your later days are going to be crowned with all sorts of coveted blessings."

* * * * * * *

During these days Ed had been growing more and more discontented and discouraged. Lele had many long talks with him—the Christian girl with the passionate, impulsive and yet weak boy, asking him to seek help from the One whom she herself found so

comforting, so helpful. But he pushed it all aside as cant. Religion, he declared, was "no good" in his case, and would be no good as long as he had to remain in the situation he was.

"And as to staying here much longer," he declared, "to be a mere pack-horse for gentlemen farmers — by Vum! I won't."

"But for the present," Lele urged, "when everything is in such a sad state of uncertainty"—

"Things have been in a dinged sad state this long while," Ed interrupted, "an' are likely to keep on melancholy for Lord knows how long. I've had about enough of it, please Moses, and want to see a new wrinkle in the curtain."

Lele once more appealed to her father on Ed's behalf, but to no purpose.

"Ed has been a great deal worse since you began instilling these impractical ideas into him than he ever was before," he said, impatiently. "Syd, as I've told you, was once as discontented and unmanageable as Ed is now. But by keeping him *under* and making him see his place, he got over it and settled down as I intended. Ed will have to come to it, too."

"But, father, what if he becomes hopelessly dissipated?" faltered Lele.

"Pooh! A boy with empty pockets won't venture far or indulge in much dissipation."

"Boys rendered desperate by parental injustice are often tempted to steal or forge notes."

Mr. Fairfax laid down the newspaper he had been reading, and an angry flush rose to his brow.

"*Lelia!*" he exclaimed, in a tone that she had not before heard him use, "if I hear any more of this talk, I'll cease to converse with you on *any* subject. I positively forbid you to mention Ed's name to me again."

Thoroughly discouraged, she was compelled to report to Ed that her father had not only forbidden her to loan him money for the purpose of learning a trade, but had vetoed any further discussion of the subject. Meanwhile he must be patient until his majority, when he would be free to choose for himself, and could rely on her for help.

Ed took it so quietly that she thought he had given up all thoughts of going away; but the next morning his place at the breakfast table was vacant, and investigation showed that he had not been in his room over night.

It was the day appointed for wheat-threshing, and Jennie felt very much worried over his non-appearance; but Charlie attempted to banish all fears by asserting that "it was just like Ed to slope when there was a big pull ahead, and come back when there was a prospect of a level stretch."

Syd did not attach much importance to the incident of his non-appearance, as he knew Ed was in the habit of playing cards all night in some of the neighbors' barns, coming home late in the day. His father, though ignorant of these escapades, was also not very

apprehensive, as he supposed Ed was trying the effect of a temporary absence in bringing him to terms.

The morning was a very busy one, for with twenty men to cook for, there was little time to think of anything save dinner. By sunrise the machine, which had "pulled in" the night before, was whistling, and men from the surrounding farms kept coming in, pitchforks in hand. They were a motley, grimy crew when the signal came to "turn out" at noon and the march dinner-ward began. Jennie had performed "prodigies of valor" in getting up that threshing dinner, as it was likely to be the last in the old home. Huge platters of roast beef and fried chickens were passed around, together with steaming dishes of potatoes, succotash, cabbage, and stewed corn. Pies by the dozen were scattered over the long tables, interspersed with plates of cookies, gingerbread and sliced pound-cake. And every convenient nook accommodated either preserves, jelly or pickles. The men ate ravenously, joking each other on the amount of appetite displayed, and washing down the toothsome viands with large draughts of steaming coffee. It kept all the girls busy replenishing cups and plates, and in a very short time the piled-up dishes were empty. Then the men filed out, laughing uproariously at the appetite of the last to leave, and the "thrashin' dinner" was over.

"They'll not be here for supper if we have luck," Syd said. "The machine is thrashing at the rate of a thousand bushels a day. We'll not have the half of that."

"How is it turning out?" asked Jennie, anxiously.

"Oh, middlin'. Not as well, quite, as I expected. Si Collins had six hundred bushels."

("Owin' to the fly an' the winter freezin' out, an' bein' rooted by hogs, trampled by cattle and nibbed by sheep," added Charlie aside to Lele, "not to mention the midge and the army worm, chintz bug, rust an' drought, nor the cockle, smut, wild onions, briars, rain after it was cut, sparrows, raincrows, rats and mice. That's what middlin' means, Lele. *Poor* means that a hail storm has knocked the socks off the whole crop just before cuttin' time.")

"He always does wonders," Jennie said in response to Syd's remark. "Is there much smut?"

"Some. And cockle! Whew! Part of it won't hardly be worth cleanin'." He turned back to ask: "Ed got home yet?"

"Why, no," said Jennie, giving him an odd, half-frightened look. "Hasn't he been at the barn?"

"Haven't seen him. Where the dickens can he be? When there's nothin' else to bother, it's *him*. I declare"—

"Hush!" said Jennie, making a little gesture to indicate that Lele was in the next room. Syd looked at her with surprise. It was an ill omen surely to see Jen so still and considerate. A nameless fear grew upon him.

"Where's Ed?" asked Mr. Fairfax, coming in late to his dinner. He had not cared to dine with the greasy, perspiring threshers.

"Dear knows!" said Jennie, with ill-assumed indifference, recalling a recent quarrel with Ed. They had not spoken since. And now what if he had killed himself? She rummaged her mind in vain for any memory of kindness she had shown her erring step-brother, notwithstanding her recent determination to do better.

"He's run off, I suppose," said Mr. Fairfax, glancing keenly at Lele. "Do you know anything as to his whereabouts?" he asked her, sharply.

Lele choked back her tears as she shook her head, and the table having been partially cleared, the family sat down to dine off the threshers' "scraps."

At 3 o'clock the machine pulled out, the farmers following it, with their pitchforks over their shoulders, to St. John's, where, as it happened, Syd had not exchanged work. So hearing nothing of Ed, he and Mr. Fairfax set out after supper to make some inquiries of people who were most likely to have seen him. But nothing was learned, and at sunset Syd returned alone. As he passed the house, he observed Ward standing outside the lawn gate, with Venus's bridle thrown over his arm, talking with Lele. Venus turned toward Syd with a recognizing whinny and made an attempt to follow him into the lane.

"Whoa, Ve!" said Ward, jerking the bridle in a way that made Syd tingle with resentment. He had never suffered Venus to be roughly handled when he owned her. She whinnied again pitifully, and turned her soft, full eyes on her former master, as if appealing

for protection. Syd caressed her glossy neck with a hand that trembled slightly. His heart was full.

"Haven't you any news of Ed?" Ward asked, in that friendly tone which had been so dear once, but was hateful to him now.

"None," returned Syd, coldly. "Mr. Fairfax will not return to-night," he added, glancing at Lele. "He stayed at the telegraph office in hopes of obtaining some clue. Have the boys done the feeding yet?"

"I don't know," said Lele, mechanically, as he rode on. "Jennie can tell you, perhaps."

"Isn't there something I can do?" Ward asked, with a boyish longing to help.

"Nothing whatever," said Syd, curtly, as he opened the gate at the foot of the lane.

"A regular snub!" said Ward, reddening. "What have I done?"

"He's vexed and worried to death. You mus'n't mind him."

"He was hardly civil to *you*," Ward went on, more and more aggrieved. "Does he always treat you so? I seldom see him of late."

"Oh, no!" said Lele, hurriedly.

"It occurs to me that he must make himself intensely disagreeable if he acts in this way every day."

"He doesn't!" Lele colored painfully. "He says very little, but is seldom rude. However, I suppose one's brother is seldom as civil as somebody else's brother."

"Syd isn't your brother at all. Don't you ever

think of that? I should think you would — both of you."

"Why should we?" But she could not meet his glance with her own frank smile, and the color throbbed painfully in her cheeks. It was the first time he had ever seen her show traces of embarrassment.

"I didn't apprehend ever being jealous of old Syd," said Ward, astonished.

"No need of any such apprehension," retorted Lele, recovering her self-control.

"Thank you," said Ward, gratefully, and very much against her wishes he took her hand. "I say, Lele," coaxingly, "*give* me my answer before the first of September, won't you?"

"I think you have it," said Lele.

"Not *the* answer, the only one I *can* take," he passionately replied.

He looked so handsome, so completely her ideal of a youthful lover, that Lele absolutely wondered at herself for being so unmoved by his fervor.

"I don't love you, Ward," said Lele, regretfully.

"Oh, don't say it, Lele," cried Ward, in a tone of despair.

"Why do you persist in caring for me"— she began.

"I persist because I can't help it," said Ward, miserably. "And it would break my heart to see you marry Syd. He isn't capable of loving you or any woman. Think of his mulish temper! Why, I haven't

any! If you were my wife, I'd strew your path with rose-leaves. You'd never know anything about poverty or hard work, ill-temper or anything disagreeable. Our home would be nothing but sunshine. Lele, don't turn away from me. I could make you *so* happy if you'd only love me."

His tone was one of melting tenderness. And Lele wished to be loved! But not by him. She resolutely maintained a safe distance.

"Why do you talk to me of these things when I'm so wretched about Ed?" she said, reproachfully. "I can't even think of anything now but him. I want you for my good friend always," she said, gently, "and hope to see you married to some one better suited"—

"You shan't give me an out-and-out refusal," cried Ward, interrupting her. "I'll wait till the first of September. You surely *will* change your mind by that time."

She shook her head sadly, and he went away wishing heartily that he had not chosen such an inopportune time for pressing his suit.

Lele wondered vaguely why she *couldn't* love the frank, unaffected young fellow who possessed in such a remarkable degree the art of being always agreeable. Why was a glance from Syd more potent to stir her pulses than all Ward's impassioned love-making?

When she returned to the house, Syd told her all there was to tell; how people had been questioned, telegrams, sent, etc., without establishing the faintest clue.

"For my part,' he said, "I don't want him to return at present. It would only lead to a battle between him and his father, and he would be sure to leave home again."

"Ed was never conquered in his life," said Jennie. "When he was a child, and even when he was bigger than Charlie, I've seen his father whip him until he couldn't speak, and yet if he was asked to give up and promise to do better, he'd shake his head."

"Did anybody ever try to conquer him by kindness?" asked Lele.

"Mamma was always kind to him," said Cora, "an' even *she* couldn't do much with him. Oh! he's a case!"

"A hardwood case — regular teak," added Charlie, laughing.

"I've been looking for this ever so long," said Syd.

"It's been coming on gradually for about—*eighteen years!*" Charlie ended the conversation by remarking.

* * * * * * *

Mr. Heldt had not repeated his last call at Fairfax farm, but the next morning he was in one of his fields chasing two of Syd's hogs with his fleet-footed cur when Mr. Mellins came by. The latter called out:

"Helloa, Heldt! Hear the news?"

"Vat news?"

"Why, Ed Fairfax has run off."

"Run off, hey? Goot riddance off pad rubbish, *I* say. When he go?"

"Night before last, I guess. Strange how worthless he is — so different from Syd. He told my boys not long ago that he didn't care what became of him. I shouldn't be much surprised if he's drownded or shot himself. Now I think of it, I heard a pistol shot over in the direction of Hubbard's woods night before last about ten o'clock. If search was made, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if they'd find his body there."

Mr. Heldt soon after came upon Mr. Si Collins, who was by the roadside with his old clay pipe stuck in one corner of his mouth and his rusty straw hat curled up at the ears, as usual. He was leisurely whetting his scythe, for he had been cutting weeds out of the fence-corners, and sang out without stopping work:

"Hello, Heldt! Heard anything of Ed Fairfax yet?"

"Blenty!" roared the plethoric and slightly deaf German. "Mellins says he kilt hisself a'ready yet."

"Where, in the plague?"

"Ofer in Hubbard's woods. By gracious! I vish dot whole dribe go do likevise," he vociferated. "Dere sthock shoost eat me oop. Ich trive hoks, und cattle, und sheep more as a pound poy, und ven I seek tamages — dom dot Seed — he knocks me vlat."

Mr. Collins lost no time in imparting the news to the next neighbor, who had some news of his own to add. The Coroner was notified, and by 10 o'clock the word came to Syd that the dead body of his step-

brother had been seen in the woods on the north side of his father's farm.

Syd was thunderstruck. Worried as he had been about Ed, he had not anticipated a tragical ending to the search.

"I don't believe it," he cried aloud. "Ed never would have killed himself."

"Here's a man who has just seen a man who saw the body," said Si Collins. "They say he was last seen in a quarrel with one of them pikers, and that he was just about three sheets in the wind. Better not tell your folks till the Coroner comes. The gals'll be for totin' the body home whether er no."

The girls! Syd thought with a great heart-pang of Lele, and of how she had tried to save Ed and make a man of him; of the many ways she had used to induce him to go to church and Sunday-school; of her varied other efforts to humanize the neglected boy and fit him for right living. Through all her futile efforts she had seemed to cherish a genuine love for the erring boy, to which at times he had not wholly failed to respond. Syd's heart stood still when he thought of the shock in store for her.

"She will hear it best from me," he thought; "but, oh! *how* can I tell her!"

He turned and strode straight across the fields, his minds a chaos of contending emotions. In the orchard he came suddenly face to face with Lele.

Involuntarily they gazed into each other's eyes.

Syd's face was pale to the lips, and there was a look upon it that told her hope was dead.

"Oh, Syd, what—what is it?" she gasped. "Don't tell me Ed is — dead."

"I hope not. I've bad news of him, but it may not be true. I was afraid," he added with difficulty, "that some one else would tell you, and I thought you'd bear it best from me."

"It is hopeless, then!" Lele grew pallid and faint.

"They tell me"— he came close to her and held her hands in his strong yet gentle clasp —"that he has shot himself or — been killed in some way — over in the woods."

A great wave of horror swept over her. It was vain then to turn to Syd or any earthly source for help. She sank down on the grass, shaken by great tearless sobs and moaning like a hurt child, unconscious of everything save overwhelming grief for the wrecked life, the lost soul of her unfortunate brother.

Syd, pierced to the very soul, and hardly conscious of what he was doing, knelt down beside her and took her in his arms.

"Oh, don't, don't, love! Don't grieve so, darling!" he pleaded in an agonized voice. "You're killing me. I can't bear it. Think what I've got to suffer — what remorse, what reproach. Oh, God! to think what I might have done for Ed, and I never did anything — never even tried."

Lele, at this, burst into a passion of tears, but pres-

ently grew calmer, and turned to comfort Syd, whose face struck her as being the saddest she had ever seen.

"I doubt not you did the best for him you knew," she said. "Don't look at me so, Syd. It wrings my heart."

"Lele, do you really *believe* there is a God?"

"My dear brother, how can you doubt it?"

"If there is anything in God or religion, why couldn't you have saved him?"

"I only know that we must not judge the Lord by feeble sense," said Lele, sadly. "His ways are inscrutable, but 'some time we'll understand.'"

Another ordeal awaited Syd — breaking the news to Jennie and the children. Fairfax Farm had not witnessed so sad a day since the death of Lady Rose. Jennie's remorse was particularly poignant.

"If I only, *only* could have the last year or two to live over again!" she cried. "Mamma made me promise to be patient with Ed, but I never tried. And now I'll never have a chance to tell him how sorry I am!" And throwing herself down upon the old hair-cloth sofa in the sitting-room, she indulged in such a passion of grief as one could expect from nobody but her.

Two hours dragged by. It was noon by the sun-mark, but not the slightest preparation had been made for dinner. The house was quiet as Sunday; the air soundless; hot sunshine poured down from a cloudless sky. In sickening suspense the girls waited, expecting

every moment to see a party of men, headed by the Coroner, bringing home Ed's mangled remains.

The clock struck 12, and as the last echo died away, Tude, who had been on the watch, came running in to announce that the men were coming.

Instantly the three girls on the back porch burst into tears, and clung to each other sobbing.

"Don't cry," said Tude, whose large eyes shone with excitement; "they haven't got *him*. I guess they haven't found him yet." And she rushed out to meet the father and his boys, who were approaching.

"Did you find him, father?" she asked, with the *naive* callousness of childhood. None of her sisters could have asked him that.

Mr. Fairfax shook his head, and Syd came to the porch and told them how, in company with twenty men, they had searched every foot of the woods and found not the slightest trace of a suicide or murder having been committed there.

"It is useless to believe a word you hear," he added, wearily. "People invent news just to show their importance."

The afternoon at home was, if possible, more agonizing than the morning. Hours seemed to lengthen into days before the searchers returned with the negative good news that no trace of the lost boy could be found. Further search would undoubtedly be useless, they all decided. Ed was probably alive, but no hopes need be entertained of hearing from him for some days.

He would certainly not return, or even write, until his father's wrath had had time to cool.

When Syd went into Ed's room that night to search for any scrap of information as to his intentions, the sight of the wheels and all the litter and *debris* dear to the young machinist's heart touched him deeply. Something else touched him, too — the evident attempt to humanize the squalid sleeping-room — Lele's doing, probably; and the little Bible lying open on the stand — Lele's gift. Syd wondered whether Ed had ever read it. On a flyleaf he found the words in Ed's unmistakable scribble — "Good-bye, Lele. You've been good to me."

Syd thought, with a groan, of how few had ever been good to Ed. He had never seemed to possess any friends. No one had cared for the unattractive boy since his step-mother died. No one since had tried by gentle means to win him from his evil ways, until Lele came. And now he was gone into the world, from which his father had thought to keep him, with no guide but his own unbridled passions.

CHAPTER XXV.

Penitence.

During the succeeding week stagnation settled down on the old Pennsylvania farmhouse. Nearly all the young people in the neighborhood, including Ward and Maud, had formed a camping party and gone to spend a few days at "The Springs," a fashionable health resort in the next county. So there were no callers, as at first—nothing to break up the dull, heavy-hearted life under the elms.

By the end of the week all doubt as to Ed's fate was set at rest by a paragraph in the county paper, which stated that one Ed Fairfax, having drank himself into *delirium tremens,* had been arrested for assault and battery, and was now lying in jail in a very precarious condition. Mr. Fairfax, whose honor was touched, lost no time in paying his fine and bringing him home. Worst of all, a note for two hundred dollars had been forged.

On a hot summer afternoon they brought him home, weak and shattered, well-nigh lifeless. Lele could but weep to see the immortal soul of her brother in a form so degraded, and, alas! so near the confines of mortality.

A sad, sad day under the elms. A silent, hopeless

day, full of regret and anguish — yea, and full of shame. Even those who had aided in the search for his dead body held themselves aloof when they knew the circumstances of his home-coming. All the neighbors, even to the pious Mrs. Stuart, had secretly hoped that his course was run. He was no credit to the neighborhood, they all declared. Why should he return to be a vexation to his respectable father, a disgrace and drawback to his marriageable sisters, and a bad example to his little brothers?

No one came to inquire whether he was dead or alive. *Delirium tremens* is a disease that excites little sympathy. The family of the sufferer usually endure its horrors alone, and if the patient die, the community is more or less scandalized at any exhibition of grief.

Bitterly did Lele now recall her crude estimate of country life before she left the Seminary — "Country people are happy, because they have the great peace, the subtle power of Nature perpetually about them. Their lives of quiet, contented toil fit them for right living."

In reality, she had found it all so different! She realized now, as never before, that *character* is not wholly dependent upon what might be supposed to be freedom from temptation. A moral and religious home influence is just as essential on the farm as in the crowded city.

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The very day after Ed was brought home, Mr. Fairfax was called away upon business, which, he

said, would admit of *no delay;* but if needed, they were to send for him. It was not merely to get away from Ed that he went, (though that was no unimportant object, for he could not bear to see his son in his present state, occupying his fastidiously kept room, a source of keen disgrace and humiliation after all his parental care,) but some debts had long been due him in a neighboring town, and he hoped to collect enough to repay what he had been compelled to borrow on Ed's account.

Meanwhile his son lay between life and death — silent, sullen and impatient of control, as of old, when conscious. At first he declined all medicine, and could not even be coaxed to swallow food. There he lay, with his eyes closed and his teeth clenched, deaf to all entreaties. When told that he would die if he did not take proper nourishment, he replied that that was just what he most desired, but that he wanted no fuss made over him. All he wanted was to be quietly left alone until the breath left his body, and then to be buried like a horse! A remark that sounded funny enough to the doctor, who set it down to delirium; but to the family it was heart-rending.

The doctor having failed, Lele tried her powers of persuasion; but their only effect was to throw Ed into a paroxysm.

"Leave me alone," he cried, shrinking away from her with an expression of terror. "Do you think I want to see you with your eyes full of tears and snakes coiling in your hair? Yes, *snakes,* I say! Ah!

they're comin' again. There's one around your neck. Oh, heavens! Take it off, kill it, quick *quick!* It's going to spring! Oo-oo! there it is on the bed!" His eyes protruded with terror. Weak as he seemed, he sat up in bed, striking at the imaginary reptile, while great drops of sweat stood on his brow. Syd, coming in at that moment, laid a firm hand on the shoulder of the trembling boy.

"Lie down, Ed. There's nothing to scare you. You're all right. Not a snake in the room. You are just a little delirious, that's all."

Ed looked around slowly, as though missing what he expected to see.

"I'm cold," he said, shivering. "Look if there ain't a snake under my pillow. Be quick, you fool. I can't sit up much longer."

"There's nothing here," said Syd, shaking up the pillow. "Lie down, Ed."

Ed sank back, white and ghastly, his eyes staring.

"Cover me up; I'm cold, cold," he whispered. "I wouldn't mind dying," he added, with a grim smile, "if it wasn't for the snakes. Don't they bother you, Syd?"

"No; they don't bother me at all,' said Syd, gently. "Go to sleep, old fellow, and you'll be all right in the morning."

"If I was well and strong, I might be able to get away from the boogers," said Ed, pitifully; "but I can't run, an' I'm not able to fight"—then drawing

in a deep breath, he added with cringing terror: *"I'm afraid they're coming again."*

"Oh, no!" said Syd, putting his hand over the other's wild eyes. "Shut your eyes and perhaps you can go to sleep."

Ed was quiet for a moment or two only. Then his face became convulsed with indescribable terror.

"Oh, Syd, the ceiling is covered, literally *covered* with snakes!" he screamed. "Help! they're droppin' on the bed by hundreds. Don't you see them? Good Lord! There's one wrapped around your arm. Oh, take me out of this and let me die in the fresh air. I'll go mad, *mad,* if I have to be cooped up with these creatures another minute."

Syd made another effort to quiet him, and again was partially successful.

"Where's Lele?" Ed next asked. "I haven't seen her since the day she asked me to be a Christian. No snakes in her hair then — nothin' but curls! Tell her I *would* go to the Old Boy in spite of her. He keeps me with the snakes because he knows there's nothing in all his infernal region to kill 'em with — not even a fence-rail — all burned up! Ha! Ha! I didn't thing hell could be worse than farmin', but it actually is."

His laugh made Syd shudder, and when he glanced over at Lele, he saw that she was perfectly colorless.

"Oh, Syd!" she gasped, and he saw that she was about to faint.

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed authoritatively. "Come out in the fresh air a minute and you'll be all right."

"I can't bear this," said Lele, piteously. "It — breaks my heart."

"There is so much that we think we can't endure, until we must," Syd replied, as he led her from the room.

A cry of thrilling fear followed them. Lele turned involuntarily to go back, but Syd put his hand on her arm detainingly.

"Don't go," he said, hurriedly. "His room is no fit place for you."

"Am I too weak to share your troubles?" asked Lele.

"Any woman is too weak to share *this kind,*" said Syd, with emphasis. And pushing her inside the parlor, he closed the door.

Lele threw herself into the old haircloth rocker which she had occupied on the first evening of her visit, and wept without restraint. It was evening, and the big parlor with its heavy curtains looked gloomy and felt chill. Lele was half-afraid yet when alone in it, and when at last she looked up and saw that she was not alone she felt terrified. But it was only Syd, come back to beg her forgiveness for his arbitrary conduct.

What would she not forgive him, as he stood there bending over her slightly, and looking at her with the eyes she loved best in all the world? She just glanced

up at him, but there was no need of words to tell him that he was forgiven.

"I am sorry to appear — harsh," he said.

"I confess you puzzle me," said Lele, wistfully. "How is Ed?"

"Better. I gave him something to quiet him." He did not tell her what. "Don't mind me, Lele. I told you at first that you mus'n't expect much of me. You must take me for what I seem to be when we are together, and not think of me at all between times."

"Do you think of me only when we are together?" Lele could not see his kindling eyes and flushed, passionate face; he stood within the shadow of the curtain. No answer came to the question. Syd had before shown an aptitude for ignoring inconvenient questions; but if she could have known the effort it cost him to disregard this one, she would have pitied him. As it was, she turned away almost in anger, and left the room.

Five minutes later she discovered that a letter from Ward, which she had received, and had not yet had time to read, was missing. Thinking she must have dropped it in the parlor, she hastily retraced her steps. Syd was seated by the window examining the postmark on the missing epistle. He put it silently into her hand.

"Well?" said Lele. "Are you angry?"

"No; I expected this. Ward's chief gift is a faculty for letter-writing."

"I don't care for his letters," said Lele, petulantly.

"Yes, you do. Girls always care for them."

"I'll show you how little I care for this one, which you see I have never read," cried the impulsive girl, and tearing open the envelope, she let the perfumed sheets fall upon the hearth. Then striking a match, she was about to ignite the whole mass, when he stopped her.

"Don't, Lele! I think I can guess the contents of this letter and what should be the answer of the maiden worldly wise."

"It's nothing but nonsense."

"The fellow thinks you're in love with him."

"But I'm not," said Lele, with burning cheeks.

"With him you could be happy, child. You never can be otherwise than miserable with — us."

He went out, closing the door after him, and she took a melancholy satisfaction in burning Ward's letter unread. She was very angry with Syd for counting her happiness so little in comparison with her worldly prospects.

* * * * * * *

Notwithstanding every effort to the contrary, Ed took neither nourishment nor medicine that night, and the next morning when Lele and Jennie went into his room, they were not only grieved, but shocked by his death-like appearance. Syd had had a night's vigil to be remembered by Ed's bedside.

"If he would take some nourishment, he might get over this," Syd said, aside; "but I can't do anything with him."

"Ed, do eat a little," pleaded Jennie, tremulously. She was so unaccustomed to treat her step-brother kindly, that now when she wished it, she could scarcely force herself to speak in a gentle tone. It was like reviving a lost art.

Ed stared at her stupidly, as though not comprehending who she was; then, as a gleam of recognition came into his dull eyes, a bitter, mocking, incredulous smile flitted across his lips, and turning his head, he gazed blankly at the wall, as before. Jennie buried her face in her hands and went out with Syd, sobbing bitterly. Lele was left with Ed alone. She bent over him and laid her hand caressingly upon his brow.

"Ed!"

The dull eyes lost their vacant stare as they met her tender gaze.

"Don't, don't touch me!" he muttered, shrinking from her as of old. "I've got too low."

"No, no!" with a strange thrill in her clear voice; "no one while he lives can do that. Only say you repent and I will pray God that you be forgiven the past."

"I can't, oh, I can't!" he reiterated. "It's too late. If I'd listened to you sooner, it might have been some use; but I can't begin now."

"You thought then that it was too late; now you see you were mistaken. *Now* is always the accepted time. Ed, I'm sure you must be sorry for the dreadful step you took when you left home. Are you not?"

"Yes; I'm sorry for *your* sake," pressing her hand

slightly with his nerveless fingers. "But I don't — deserve that — you will think of me."

"I can't *help* thinking of you, Ed," said Lele, with streaming eyes. "You must try to live for my sake, dear."

"I'll not get well. I don't want to. I *won't,*" he cried, passionately. "If you drag me back to life again, you'll regret it as long as you live. The devil is — right behind me — pushin' me on. I can't go right — if I try."

"Oh, my poor boy," cried Lele, kneeling by his side; "if you should die without a hope of eternal peace, it would cast a shadow over my whole life. You know — for I have told you in stronger words than I dare use now — how much, how deeply I long to see you become a Christian. I can not *bear* to let you go down to your grave with a soul so dark and rebellious. Once more I beseech you, dear, by all that is sacred, by the memory of your sainted mother, to give your heart to God, and ask him for Christ's sake to forgive you and make you one of his children."

The sweet voice, shaken by its very intensity of earnestness, faltered and broke.

As for Ed, something within his soul seemed to give way, and his obstinacy disappeared like a dam broken by a mighty torrent.

"Before God, I wish I could," he said.

"God will help you."

Ed's cheeks were wet with tears.

"Lele," he said, brokenly, "if you'll help me — I'll try to get — well,— and yes, I'll try — to be a Christian!"

Lele cried for very joy. It was such peace, such deep joy, to know that poor, misguided Ed was on the right road at last. And fervently did she thank God that her prayers had been answered.

By and by, when Ed had partaken of some toast and tea, which he ate with the docility of a child, Lele said, as she smoothed back his hair with a caressing touch:

"Now, dear, don't you feel altogether like a different boy?"

"Yes; it's a strange feeling," said Ed, musingly. "I feel just this minute that I don't hate anybody — not even Jen an' father! It can't last, I'm afraid. Don't leave me, Lele. I can only feel good when with you."

"I'll stay with you, Ed," she replied, fondly. "You're getting to be the brother I always thought you would become, some day."

He smiled, closed his eyes, and almost instantly fell into a sound sleep, the first he had enjoyed for days. When he awoke, three hours later, Lele was still at his bedside. By her side stood Jennie, regarding him with a gaze of almost agonized entreaty. For a moment the old rebellious feeling came back, and Ed turned his eyes from hers impatiently. Lele bent over him, however, with a radiant face, saying:

"Here's Jennie, Ed. She's come to ask your for-

giveness for everything she's done to vex you. You *do* forgive her, don't you?"

He looked at Jennie a moment in his old sullen way, his lips so tightly closed that it seemed to require more will-power than he possessed to open them in speech. Perhaps he would not have spoken, but the impulsive girl sank on her knees at his bedside and sobbed out:

"Oh, Ed, don't, *don't* say you can't forgive me. I know I've been harsh and unsisterly, and that I've never tried to make you happy"—

"Never mind that," muttered Ed, as his face cleared. "I — I want you to forget a good deal, too, Jennie. If I live, I want to be a better boy than I've been. You must help me. It's so hard for me to do right."

"I'll help you all I can,' said Jennie, humbly. "And I want to be better, too. I've been very miserable," she added, with a long-drawn sigh. "But I know my wretched temper has intensified all our troubles, and if there is a God in heaven, I hope he will help me conquer it."

"'*If* there is a God?' Jennie, don't you believe there is?" Ed asked, solemnly.

"I suppose there is, and, yes, I *hope* there is. I have found life without religion a bitter, hopeless thing. If I had as much faith in God as Lele has, I should be a very different being, and perhaps do other people good instead of harm."

Hard as it was for her to make such a confession, it made her happy, and it made her hearers happy, too.

Syd, who had been hovering around the door — uncertain whether to enter — came in, and joining the group, looked down at Ed, whose face had lost its purple flush, and was colorless, now, as the pillow.

"I want to be better friends, too, Ed," he said, huskily.

Ed instantly took the hand he held out. But the next moment his face clouded.

"You'll not sneer at me for tryin' to be religious?" he asked.

"*No!*" cried Syd, with emphasis. "I'm thinking it wouldn't hurt the rest of us to be doing something in that line. Come, Jinks," he added, cheerfully, "you and Lele get this boy something substantial to eat. He's hungry."

From that hour Ed began to convalesce. Every one, even the children, tried to avoid irritating him, and his temper and health rapidly improved. But when Mr. Fairfax heard what had transpired, he laughed contemptuously.

"Pooh! I wouldn't give *that,*" snapping his fingers, "for Ed's religion. He'll be right back in the old tracks as soon as he is fairly able to knock around."

"Ah, father, whether you believe in religion or not, you must see that there is far more power in love than force. And religion is but an exalted type of love."

Her father gave her a puzzled glance.

"You have queer notions," he said, and relapsed into thoughtful silence.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A Crisis.

Ed was so much better that the boys had spent the whole afternoon in the fields. It was the supper hour. Syd, as he hurried homeward through the orchard, felt a sense of relief that Maud's piano was still silent, and Ward yet miles away at the camping party. For a wonder none of the stock had that day broken into anybody's corn, and so things looked a trifle brighter to the anxious, young farmer. Syd was in a benignant mood, and meant to pass a pleasant evening on the veranda, doing what he could to confirm Ed in his new resolve, and for once enjoying a brotherly chat with Lele.

As he approached the pump to wash his hands, an unwelcome sound smote his ear: is was Ward Collins's laugh. Syd set the wash-pan hard on the pan-stand and turned his back grimly on the parlor window. He had been suckering tobacco, and his hands looked like a negro's. He set his teeth and scrubbed vigorously with some soap-weed.

Ward at this moment came to the window and waved a hand as white and daintily manicured as a girl's, shouting in that jolly tone of his:

"Hello, Syd!" as in the old days.

"Hello, Ward. Got back?" Ward wished there was a ring of truer cordiality in the voice. "Thought you folks were to be gone for several days yet."

Syd glanced down at his faded working jacket and gummy trousers with a discomfited sense of the contrast between his appearance and Ward's. The latter certainly looked and acted the gentleman, and Syd was bitterly conscious that he did not.

"I'll never be anything but a dig," he thought, his heart sinking with a plunge. "What a mean shame it would be to expect *her* to share such a lot as mine, when she might share his. He'll never have to actually wield the hoe, as I shall all my days, probably."

He was hardly conscious of what reply Ward made, or of anything that was going on for the next hour or two. He only knew that it was Ward and not he who sat on the veranda in the moonlight and talked to Lele. Through the hushed air of the tranquil night he could hear her silvery laughter, and it struck on his ear pitilessly sweet. Perhaps it would have softened and cheered him a little had he been enjoying the veranda chat with the rest; but from his window it only mocked him. At last he went down-stairs and stood at the side gate like a grim sentinel until Ward went away. Unlatching the gate, he was passing out in silence, piqued at Syd's rudeness, when the latter caught his rival's eye, and by a glance almost compelled him to stop.

"Do you want anything?" Ward asked.

"Only this"— Syd spoke in a strained voice —

almost hoarsely: "Don't mind how I act. I'm so out of sorts with the world this summer that I can hardly be civil to any one. And I remember you used to regard me as rather a decent fellow — above spite and malice, at least."

"I did, indeed," said Ward, heartily, "and that's why I've been overlooking your slights of late. I know it is natural you shouldn't like me as well as you once did; but, Syd, I miss your friendship so! Maud St. John wasn't worth falling out over, was she?"

"We'll not discuss Maud," said Syd stiffly.

"Confess that you see now how shallow she is."

"Well, and then?"

"I really did you a good turn in cutting you out!"

"Possibly."

"To be candid, Syd, I consider it a piece of trumpery weakness for two fellows to fall out over such a wax doll as Maud."

"That's merely because you are tired of her. Are you ever going to settle down, or do you purpose to amuse yourself with first one woman and then another all your life?"

Syd's tone was stern; it had cadences of contempt in it that stung Ward, who turned angrily:

"Syd McKnight, what do you mean? I never seriously trifled with any girl's heart in my life."

"Indeed!"

"Never intentionally," reiterated Ward, thinking uneasily of Jennie, and hoping Syd hadn't heard of their interview at the stile. "But if it will do you

any good to know," he added, in a confidential undertone, "I intend to settle down pretty soon."

Syd knew Ward well enough to feel sure he would tell all about his plans without questioning. He waited in silence, and presently Ward began:

"I say, Syd, your step-sister is a lovely girl."

"She is, indeed," coldly.

"She's the most *interesting* girl I ever saw," Ward went on. "I wonder you can be with her so much and not half fall in love with her yourself."

"She seems to prefer you," Syd said, quietly. "Do you have any fancy for her?"

"Fancy? I'm distractedly in love with her, by Jove! — over head and ears! I dream of her every night, and the day that I can't be with her seems like two days. What else do you suppose brought me home so soon? The time without Lele went so deuced slow that I thought another day of it would finish me. Positively"—

"Never mind!" said Syd, stopping him. "I've heard all that before, you know — about other girls."

"Oh, but I never was so hard hit as I am now. I'd die for her," he added, fervently.

"I doubt it," Syd retorted.

"When I'm trying my best to coax her to marry me? I mean business this time, old fellow, if ever a man did."

Syd took hold of Ward's shoulders with a grasp of iron, and his voice sounded hard, too, when he said:

"Tell me the truth, boy, if you ever *did* speak the

truth. Do you love Lele Fairfax enough to make her happy if she marries you?"

"Syd, I do honestly." The boyish voice rang true, at last, and the blue eyes looked straight into Syd's. "I hope I may die if I ever cause her an hour's unhappiness."

"I hope you may," said Syd, unsteadily. "I hope to God you may!"

Ward at length began to observe how agitated Syd was.

"You don't want me to marry her," he said, suspiciously.

"God knows I only ask that she be happy and spared some of the experiences one has to endure here," said Syd, in a voice that thrilled with pain.

"I don't wonder you want to see her more comfortably situated. I wouldn't stay here myself, if I were you, and put up with the things you have to bear. And as for bringing a wife here — you couldn't think of it, of course."

"No, I couldn't," said Syd, enduring the wrench of final renunciation.

"But if Lele will only have me, I'll be the best of brothers-in-law," Ward added. "I can help you, Syd, more than you think."

"Thanks. But I don't expect to bother you any."

"You and I are not to be friends, then?"

"Not enemies, I hope."

"We must be one or the other. Won't you take

my hand, Syd? I really can't bear to let this thing run on much longer. Say we're friends again."

Syd hesitated for a long minute. Then the strong brown hand, calloused with scars of toil, clasped the soft white hand of his more fortunate neighbor.

"Be good to her, Ward," was all he could say.

"Don't be afraid, Syd. I'll be true as steel, God bless her."

After Ward was gone, Syd went back to his room. The moonbeams lay in checkered patterns on the floor and on his mother's picture. Syd stood for a long time with his elbows on the mantel, his head bowed on his hands before the portrait, as though it had been a shrine.

"Oh, God, I can't bear this!" he uttered at last. He went out into the hall and leaned over the banister, to see if he could catch some drift of the conversation between Lele and the children on the veranda. He could scarcely keep his feet from carrying him downstairs. Never in his life had he been so famished for a word of tenderness; it seemed impossible any longer to endure this starved existence.

But again, as in a mirror, he saw his conduct as others would, or did, see it.

"The Fairfaxes," the gossips would say, "were about to be sold out by the sheriff, when a match was hastily contrived between Ome's eldest daughter and his step-son, and her money was used in paying off the mortgage. Lucky dog — Syd. Always had an eye for the main chance. But rather hard lines on pretty

Lele, whose beauty soon faded when she took the tread-mill work of a hard-up farmer's wife."

"Oh, what a fate that would be for a cultured girl like Lele!" he groaned. "To come here and slave her life out as my poor mother did, when she might otherwise have all the advantages of travel and society. This narrow, monotonous life would kill her."

It did not make it seem more nearly right to know that every member of the family desired it, and that even Lele herself seemed to prefer him. It must never be.

Syd thought it quite likely that Mr. Fairfax would soon urge the matter upon Lele. And, in fact, the very thing he apprehended came to pass an evening or two later.

Lele and her father were walking in the orchard toward sunset, and after a good deal of chat of no special importance, the latter remarked in an off-hand way, as though the subject were a new one and had not been weighing on his mind somewhat heavily for weeks past:

"Lelia, there is a certain subject which it is my duty as a father to discuss with you; namely, your future."

He lit an expensive cigar, took two or three puffs with evident enjoyment, and then resumed:

"You have now arrived at the age when most girls expect to marry, and secure that enviable position in society which matrimony alone has power to bestow upon a woman. You are already, I believe, on the

verge of completing your twentieth year. Your honored mother became my wife at the age of nineteen."

"Yes, sir," said Lele, painfully embarrassed.

"Being fond of society and possessing considerable beauty, not to add — accomplishments," Mr. Fairfax went on, as if beginning a speech in court, "you will probably marry before the lapse of another year."

"Oh, no!" cried Lele, and her cheeks flamed and paled by turns.

"It is desirable that you should. A woman of your age is old enough to be settled in a home of your own, and the longer she delays the less likelihood has she of making a good match — from a worldly point of view."

"I never expect to do that," said Lele.

"Very few romantic school girls do. If they did, there would be fewer divorce suits. Love is a flame that burns itself out in a very short time, I can tell you."

"It seems to be that true love is forever," said the young girl, with quivering lips. "It will be with me, I know," she added, almost inaudibly.

Mr. Fairfax set this reply down as too weak and womanish to require notice.

"If you remain at home," he went on, "which I trust you will — though I do not urge it upon you to forego the chances of a good settlement in life which a residence with your friends, the Carpenters, would give — you can not but see that your opportunities will be somewhat limited."

Mr. Fairfax indulged in a few more fragrant whiffs with unabated enjoyment.

"There is scarcely a youth in the community that I would wish you to marry," he proceeded; "not one that would be able to offer you a comfortable home, except that boy of Si Collins's; and though he's a good-hearted fellow and may settle down to be something of a man, I believe you can do better."

Here he made a very impressive pause.

"I don't deny that he has asked me for your hand. What answer must I give?"

"To Ward Collins? A positive refusal!" exclaimed Lele.

"Well, I expected that you would prefer one with more stamina, more force of character, more industry. Now if you had not been accustomed to regard Sydney McKnight as your brother, I should not hesitate to recommend *him* as a suitable husband for you."

"Syd!" faltered Lele, and the throbbing of her heart sent the roses from her cheeks. After all, it might have been a preconcerted scheme between them!

"Yes, Syd," said Mr. Fairfax, with emphasis. "In most respects you couldn't do better. He is honorable, moral, temperate, industrious, energetic, unflinchingly true to principle."

"You think it our duty to marry whether we love each other or not?" asked Lele, with downcast eyes.

"I am very far from urging a match so advantageous to myself, and to every member of the family," replied Mr. Fairfax, loftily; "for, if you marry

my step-son (who is in no way related to you), I am aware that your fortune would come into our family at a most opportune time. At a time, indeed, when ruin stares us in the face, and only such an event could save us all from being turned out of house and home."

Here a short turn in the path brought them face to face with Syd, who had evidently heard a part, if not all, of Mr. Fairfax's argument in his behalf, and seemed in nowise grateful for the same. His eyes burned like live coals, and seemed literally to light up his whole face, which was perfectly colorless with anger.

"In heaven's name, what are you talking about?" he cried, in a voice of mingled shame and rage.

Mr. Fairfax stood speechless.

"I had expected this, and yet I felt that even *you* could hardly descend to it!" cried Syd. "You tricked my mother into marrying you in order to get possession of what little money she had, and now you would induce your daughter to let herself be robbed in a similar way!"

"Nonsense! Visionary, wicked, *insulting* nonsense!" cried Mr. Fairfax, explosively.

"My mother put what money she had in this farm and became your bond-slave, Mr. Fairfax. We had the best mother on earth, and everything that we really needed to make us happy, except a father's love. You never gave us that. Now we have nothing We have lost what little patrimony should have come to us; we have lost our mother; we have lost heart and

hope. And now you ask another woman to put her money and life into this farm, and see both frittered away, as they would if you retained control. You fettered my mother to a life of unceasing care, toil and worry, brightened by no love on your part; and now you have the cheek to urge a loveless marriage upon your daughter as a cloak for securing more funds to sink in what you are fond of styling the 'fine old Fairfax homestead.'"

"This language, sir, is extraordinary," said Mr. Fairfax, haughtily, while Lele stood gazing at Syd in amazed, shocked silence. "It is extraordinary, I repeat, not only from the blind folly it betrays, (for your scruples, young man, are nothing more than a fool's scruples, that have crept into a head normally sensible enough,) but is extraordinary from the amount of disrespect and ingratitude it shows to *me*, who have been a father to you for nearly seventeen years, and have treated you in most respects better than I did my own children."

"Better! Great Heavens! How have you treated me?" cried Syd, wrought to madness by long pent-up resentment. "What have you given me or done for me? I've worked ever since I was ten years old — always beyond my strength. I never knew a time when there was not more depending upon me than I could possibly do or get done. You never gave me a chance to make a penny for myself, and I stand now before this girl, to whom you are recommending me as a suitable match, without a penny in the world to

call my own! And I blush with shame, as any *man* would, when I own it."

Syd thrilled painfully with a consciousness of his utter insignificance. And he did so *long* to be looked up to and regarded as an important factor in the world. It seemed to him that he should go raving mad if compelled to endure much more of the dwarfing process to which he had been subjected.

"Every penny I've ever made has gone toward keeping a roof over our heads," he went on, "and now, because you think Collins wants to foreclose, you try to persuade Lele that it's her Christian duty to marry *me,* so you can rob her of the money her aunt thought she had placed beyond your reach. I tell you both," he glanced at Lele for the first time, "that *that* question is forever settled. *I* won't be a party to any such robbery. And as for the rest — this kind of existence — I don't call it *life* — has got to come to an end some time, and it might as well be the middle of September as not. I've worked like a man to save the place, and if you, sir, had helped, instead of hindering, it wouldn't now be ready to be sold under the hammer. As for saving it with Lele's money, *I'll* never marry a girl to defraud her of a few thousand dollars and doom her to a life of drudgery and discouragement, as you did mamma. Neither will I work any longer under you as your unpaid overseer. Hereafter I shall work *my own* farm or none, for in a few days I shall be of age!"

Without giving either of them time to reply, he

turned short round and walked away toward the barn with long, swift strides.

Mr. Fairfax was utterly crushed. He realized clearly for the first time what chaos he had made of his affairs; how the old homestead was at last to be wrenched from the family of Fairfax, its owners from time immemorial, and submitted to the disgrace of a sheriff's sale. He had never anticipated this, even in his gloomiest moments, but had firmly believed that something would turn up at the last moment to avert such a crisis. How abominable was this conduct of his step-son, who had it in his power to prevent any immediate disaster to the estate! True, the boy was right. He had been wronged—unintentionally, according to the best of Mr. F.'s belief. He had, of course, suffered some hardships — most of the family had. Moreover, Syd's patient way of submitting to them had given his step-father an entirely wrong idea of their effect.

Mr. Fairfax felt ashamed, after such a scene, to look his daughter in the face, and was glad to find, when he had picked himself up from the moral heap into which he had been thrown, that she had vanished somewhere. He returned to the house dejected, amazed, hopeless. It was a new thing under the sun for Syd to turn and rend him thus; he felt powerless to defend himself, and knew not whither to turn for help. For years he had been shifting the family burdens to Syd's shoulders, and in this last crisis he had been sure of his step-son's aid. The mortgage had

been in his mind when he invited Lele home. And it had very soon occurred to him that a marriage between her and his step-son would be a most fortunate occurrence. Providence, for a time, had seemed to smile upon his plans. But alas for the "schemes of mice and men"!

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Under Green Apple Boughs."

Lele had made her escape to Jen's favorite old apple-tree, where some gnarled, low branches formed a sort of sylvan throne.

Here in leafy solitude she sat — downcast, flushed, humiliated, exquisitely miserable — her arm resting upon an overhanging bough, with her face pressed against it, as wretched for the time as poor Jen in her saddest musings. Faint with contending emotions, for a time thought was chaos. Not a word could her mind shape. Nothing crystallized within it but flashes of shame, disappointment and despair as the whole period of her visit passed before her in imagination. Again she saw Syd in all his phases — tender, harsh, kind, curt, brother-like, cousin-like — but was he ever absolutely lover-like?

No. Syd had never loved her. His reference to a "loveless marriage" proved that. And why, with it all, had he fascinated her so?

A hundred times she had told herself that she would hoe row about with Syd in the fields rather than live in luxury with any other man.

"And to think what a blind, sentimental fool I have been! Syd doesn't care for me at all — never did

— never can — not even well enough to marry me, though he knows it is the only way to save our home from destruction!" were the taunting words that finally formed in her mind. "I wish I could die. Oh, I do *wish* I could die!"

Large tears splashed on the dead leaves below.

Then the grotesque side of the whole affair began to dawn upon her, as she pictured her father standing there, gravely urging her to lay her hand and fortune at her step-son's feet; her confused demurring; Syd's natural fury at the humiliating position in which he was placed, and the tableau they all three made during Syd's excited harangue. The memory of her father's chagrined, scandalized visage was too much for her risibles; but Syd's unmistakable rejection of the hand offered by her father, and the gloom it entailed, each time she mentally viewed it, brought forth fresh sobs.

So the evening hour passed in the quiet orchard. How loudly the katydids sang in the meadow adjacent; in the distant pond the frogs, hidden among the calamus leaves, began to croak. She could hear Jennie's clear voice calling the cows in the pasture below the barn.

"Sook, Brindle! Sook, Bess! Sook! Sook! So' cow!"

The sun had set, and from the hills the sunset light was fading; under the apple-trees were shadows long and dim. Lele grown calmer, if not happier, descended from her sylvan retreat, and went, by the barnyard, down through the grassy lane to the house. She took

this route in order to avoid meeting any of the family, lest her flushed, tear-stained face and sadly-tumbled hair should invite questions, which she was ill-prepared to answer. To her dismay, she came unexpectedly upon Ward Collins at the little gate. He had called to ask her to take a drive. Wasn't she staying in the house too much since Ed was sick?

Lele begged to be excused, saying it was impossible for her to go that evening. She could not conceal the fact that she had been crying, and Ward looked distressed.

"You are in trouble," he said, gently. "Is it anything I can share?"

Lele shook her head and tried to force back the tears.

"I would give ten years of my life to be of use to you, if you would only let me," said Ward, wistfully.

"I couldn't think of allowing it," said Lele, making a sorry attempt at laughter.

"You're just homesick, perhaps," said Ward, with tender sympathy. "I know a sovereign remedy for it. May I administer it?" He bent over her, at once laughing and earnest. "Oh, Lele! to think of a home with *you* in it. What are these people thinking of to let you cry when you ought to be so happy?"

This was very soothing, coming, as it did, on the heels of the torturing scene in the orchard. Lele was almost piqued into accepting Ward then and there.

"Syd has made any love between him and me impossible forever," she thought, "and he has often

advised me to marry Ward. Why not?" But when Ward's arm would have clasped her waist, she repelled him.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Fairfax," Ward said, humbly.

"Don't mind. I'm not in a sentimental mood this evening," said Lele, in a tone of apology.

"You never are. I wish you were — some time. And I wish I could be of use to you in some way."

"Thank you, Ward," the low voice uttered tremulously.

Ward's heart leaped when she pronounced his name. It was the first time she had ever left off the prefix, and it gave him a certain sense of security in her esteem that he had never before experienced.

"Will you come in?" she added, with rather faint-hearted hospitality.

"Not this evening. Some other eve, if agreeable."

"To-morrow, then." She gave him her hand, which he almost forgot to release. "Good-night, Ward."

"Good-night, Lele. May good fairies steal your tears, and make you the happiest girl in the world — as you are the sweetest."

There was a tremor in the boyish voice. His whole manner was tinged with a winsome tenderness. Lele wondered, as she left him, why it is so much easier to love a man who doesn't care two straws about you, than it is to care for one whose sole delight would be in inventing new ways of showing that he adores you.

She entered Jennie's room, where she always slept now, and involuntarily sat down on the foot of Tude's bed, which was near the back window; leaning her head wearily against the wall, she uttered a little shuddering sigh, and sat listlessly gazing through the window, her hands lying passive in her lap, palm upward, one within the other, in an attitude characteristic of Lele in moments of despondency, but impossible with one of Jen's fiery temperament.

"After all," she mused, sadly, "the farm will have to be sold. For if Syd goes away, as I suppose he will, the farm must go, that is certain. What can I do? Nothing — at least of any consequence — and it breaks my heart to think of all that will happen; the scattered, homesick family; the sad, uncertain future. And Syd gone"— Lele's handkerchief was wet with tears already. She rummaged for another.

Down-stairs all had been silent as the grave; but now Syd emerged from the dining-room door, and advancing to the edge of the porch, leaned dejectedly against one of the pillars, while glancing, by the aid of a match, over a letter in the dim twilight. Lele's heart leaped and the hot blood surged into her cheeks as she watched him. What a "bonnie lad" Syd was — so tall, so strong, so proud, so true to what he thought the right course. Her whole future was in eclipse, because this broad-shouldered fellow, who could be so harsh and so gentle, so cool and so impassioned, worshiped his pride more than he did her.

"Oh, if Providence had willed that our pathway

through life should be the same," she reflected, miserably. "What will life be worth without him? Had I as many lovers as Mary Tudor, I would give them all for one word of tenderness from him."

She felt a mad impulse to run down-stairs and tell him that his hateful pride was breaking her heart; but wisely desisted. Closing her eyes, she tried desperately to reason herself into a more rational mood.

Voices roused her and drew her gaze downward again. Jennie was talking with Syd.

"Could you endure life in Dakota?" she heard him ask. "I think seriously of emigrating."

"I don't know, Syd. It's so cold there! People die in blizzards right in sight of home. Do you really think we'll have to give up the farm, after all?"

"Yes, I do. This life is killing us both, Jinsey. There *must* be a change." Syd gave a sigh that was almost a groan. A chord in Lele's heart vibrated to it.

Jennie stood looking at him, perplexed and miserable.

"I don't know what we're to do, Syd, if *you* give up," she said, wistfully. "Have you and father quarreled?"

"Yes, we've quarreled!" cried Syd, passionately. "It seems to me now that my resentment against him and his slipshod, selfish ways has been growing every day since I knew him, and this evening it burst all bounds. I have tried to be respectful to the man my mother once loved and honored; tried to keep up a sem-

blance of gratitude for the galling bondage I've been forced to endure here; but I can never feel one shadow of respect for the man again."

"What in the world has he done?"

"What do you suppose? He wants next to set his affairs straight by forcing Lele to marry me!"

Lele had listened unthinkingly up to this point. But as the last sentence was uttered she sprang up and hurriedly left the room, her cheeks and ears fairly tingling. What if he should tell Jennie that he had never even dreamed of falling in love with his too-susceptible step-sister? Ah! if she could have known what followed!

"You would be a fool to object to that arrangement," said Jennie, shortly.

"Oh, Jean, how can you say that?" cried Syd, whose face and eyes were aglow with shame. "Do you think that if I and every member of this family were to be thrown on the county for support, and I could prevent it by just asking Lele to marry me, that I'd do it?"

"I thought you liked her?"

"*Liked* her!" echoed Syd, with an indescribable accent. "The more I like her, the less I am willing to see her throw herself away. I believe she is quite capable of marrying me from a sense of duty. Women delight in making foolish sacrifices. I look yet for you to make a sudden resolve to marry old Bill Markley."

"Would you advise it?"

"No, by thunder, I wouldn't. And if you were

in Lele's place, and a man in mine were unscrupulous enough to want to marry you and sink what little money you had in a place like this, I'd take pleasure in kicking him as far as from here to the big road."

"How did Lele seem to take what you said to her father?" Jennie asked.

"I don't know. I never looked at her but once."

"Were you very rude?"

"Horribly. I wish she had not been present."

"Ward is out at the gate now talking to her," said Jennie.

"Then she'll come in engaged. Ward wants to marry her, and I think has asked Mr. Fairfax's consent. It wouldn't be in human nature for her to refuse a fellow like Ward just after such a scene as I made in the orchard."

He felt that he deserved this. A maddening sense of regret seized him.

"I hardly think, after all, that she will ever marry him," said Jennie.

"Yes, she will. It's decreed." He walked impatiently up and down the porch. Then he burst out:

"Jen, if you say so, we'll quit this dead and alive business and go West right off. There's nothing but misery here for either you or me. Let's take up a claim. I can borrow a little money — enough to keep us from starving, until we get a start, if there's *any* chance for such as us this side of eternity."

"Is that the last resort?"

"I had thought of something else, but if she — I

don't think I should care to stay here under any circumstances, and perhaps you wouldn't, either."

"After they are married, he means," thought Jennie.

"Will you go?" he repeated.

"I can't desert Tude and Cora, Syd."

"I'll take you three girls, and let Mr. Fairfax look after the boys."

"Oh, Syd! Leave Clem and Charlie to *his* care. You know what kind of raising they'd get," said Jennie, with wet lashes.

"They keep you mad half the time, Jinsey."

"Yes, but the house would be dead without them. And, besides, I've been miserably wrong in my attitude toward the boys of the family, Syd. I do so *long* for a chance to redeem myself in that."

"I couldn't take them without their father's consent, and you know what a fad he has for sticking to his lawful rights. It would have been money in his pocket to let Ed go two or three years ago; but he wouldn't."

"It would break my heart to have the family scattered east and west, as so many families are. It is cruel to be placed in such a position," cried Jennie, very bitterly. "Syd, I'm the most miserable girl in the world."

"You haven't a very comprehensive idea of human wretchedness, Jinsey. You might be really worse off than you are, I can tell you."

"I don't see how," said rebellious Jennie.

"You are a self-respecting young woman."

"Of course." Jean stared at him through the dusk, but could catch but a dim outline of his features.

"You wouldn't be if you had consented to meet Ward Collins every evening at the stile in the hill pasture."

Jennie was thunder-struck.

"How do you know anything about it?" she faltered.

"I happened along on a fence-fixing expedition, as usual. Some of our hogs had been getting through a hole in the hedge. You were both too excited to notice me."

"And you heard"—

"Not a word; but I could guess a good deal. If you had not concluded the interview as you did, I should have pitched Ward over the hedge into the hollow."

"I did what I thought was right," said Jennie, proudly.

"Of course. I honor you for it, Jinsey. About nineteen girls out of twenty would have made the greatest mistake of their lives then."

"Perhaps I did," said Jennie, almost inaudibly. "I might have made him care for me — and respect me, too."

"Never believe it for a moment, Jinsey. Ward is too weak to resist the faintest shadow of a temptation. A girl who consents to a clandestine interview admits a pitiful lack of self-respect and prudence," he added.

"You and I are both a hundred times better off at this time than we would be in some circumstances which we can imagine. We have stood by our principles, and can at best go down to defeat with clear consciences."

"Yes, we can," said Jennie, most hopefully. "I never thought of that. I have often regretted treating Ward as I did that evening, but I never shall again. Thank you, Syd; I believe it was your presence that helped me to do right that day."

"No, it was the result of our mother's training Don't you remember how she taught us always to be guided by principle in everything, and never to let any mere thought of what would be for our happiness outweigh it?"

"It makes life hard to be always weighing consequences beforehand."

"Not so hard as to be compelled to weigh them afterward," said Syd, significantly. "I never look at my mother's picture without thinking of one of her favorite maxims — 'One must keep one's honor bright, no matter what else is tarnished.'"

"I often think of that, too," said Jennie, sighing. "But though I can do right in great things, the little whips and stings of daily life are too many for me. I am so irritable, so rebellious against Fate, so full of longing for better things, that I feel at times as though something was tearing me to pieces, body and soul. I crave the good things of life worse than Ed at his worst ever craved liquor, and I don't see why

they are *all* denied — fame and friends and wealth and happiness."

"No more do I. But I don't choose to barter my soul, or my sacred honor, or even the respect of my neighbors, for the least one of them," Syd replied.

"I wouldn't let the opinion of a man like old Heldt"—

"Yes, you would!" Syd interrupted. "I wouldn't have known just how the neighborhood"—

He sighed deeply, and sat down again with his aching head resting on his hands.

"Is going West the *only* thing you have thought of?" Jennie asked, presently. "If you don't want to stay here."

"Yes, as yet. I'm not sure it's the best plan. It will, after all, be necessary to wait and see Mr. Fairfax through his troubles with old Si. I owe him that much, surely. But we must be prepared to make a move of some kind by the middle of September. Bear that in mind."

A moment later Syd was alone. He heard Jennie clattering the milk-pails in the kitchen. Syd wondered if there was a stray dog in Christendom as forlorn as he was.

"But I'm not dead yet," he reflected, straightening his shoulders and holding his head erect. "And I'm not going to give up the fight until I *do* die. I don't care to have a hoe or wheat-shock on *my* tombstone. It shall bear the simple inscription: 'Syd McKnight— A man who tried to farm without capital. Died game.' That will tell the tale. No poetry required."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Facing the Inevitable.

At the breakfast table next morning not the faintest reference was made by any one to the incident in the orchard. Mr. Fairfax ate in grim and gloomy silence, glancing occasionally at his step-son, but getting each time, it seemed to him, less assurance that Syd would ever retract from the stand he had taken the evening before. The young man had evidently marked out a course of action for himself, and would follow it, sheriff's sale or no sheriff's sale.

But if Lele's father derived no solace from his step-son's conduct, Lele herself derived still less. Syd went no further than to apologize, after breakfast, for any seeming rudeness to her. During the ensuing days, by a "series of surprising coincidences," he was continually absent when Lele was present, and present when she was absent. Sometimes he seemed too busy or absorbed to be conscious of her existence; again he had sudden headaches or was in some other way disqualified for conversation when his presence was most strongly desired. There were times when he was so busy that he even failed to come to his meals, but would order them sent to the field. As for an evening spent on the veranda with her and the children, that was not to be thought of. He would sit in the twilight beside

his window, evening after evening, with his hands over his ears to keep from hearing the merriment those thoughtless children kept up down-stairs. He was glad they could — poor things — keep up a semblance of gayety, even though he dare not share in it. But the sound of their young voices mingled with Lele's stuck in his heart like an arrow. Once Tude came running up to beg him to join them in some of their childish games, as he used to do. Syd flatly refused.

"I wonder why you are so *distressedly* mopy," said the child. "You're not even reading, are you?"

Syd had a lamp and a book that evening, in both of which even Tude could detect a lack of interest.

"No, I'm thinking. Run away, Tudikins," said Syd, in a tone of weariness.

"How tired you look, Syd! I'll give you Lele's last kiss to brighten you."

She threw herself into his arms and kissed him, laughing and shaking her golden curls. "Lele is the very dearest girl on this earth," she added, emphatically, "and everybody knows it but you, you ugly, bad boy," she added, with a pout.

The tears sprang to Syd's eyes.

"There! I didn't mean to make you cry," said the child, resting her curly head against his shoulder. "And you're not ugly and bad, Syd. You're the dearest boy in this world. Shall I give you another of Lele's kisses?"

"You scamp! Who ever put such nonsense into your head?"

"Nobody! I thought it all up my own self."

"How many kisses have you brought me, Tudikins?"

"Eight, I guess. They're sent C. O. D.," said the whimsical child, presenting her rosy lips. "An' I'm goin' to take her back the pay!"

"Confess this originated in Charlie's brain," said Syd, laughing.

"Charlie mentioned a little of it," confessed Tude. "He said you were mopin' here like a dismal ole owl, an' then I thought it all up my own self about bringin' you Lele's kisses."

"Heaven reward you!" said Syd, gently; "but some things are non-transferable, you know. Don't bring me any more."

He put her firmly out of the room, and then spent an hour in wishing she would come back with another supply. But Mistress Tudikins came no more. He suspected that Lele had heard of the shipment and laid an embargo on the stock.

It was very soon after that when Syd, upon going one evening, as usual, straight up to his room after his day's work, found on the bureau an envelope containing the two photographs of which, very early in their acquaintance, Lele had deprived him. He took them out slowly, his face presenting a picture that Lele would have given much to see.

Not a word of explanation accompanied them, but he understood it to be an acknowledgment on her part that all was over between them, if, indeed, any ties had

ever existed. Whereat he should, to be consistent, have rejoiced greatly, and gone to bed in a tranquil frame of mind, instead of lying sleepless most of the night on a pillow of thorns, as he did.

At last he rose, lit the lamp, and tearing each picture to bits, watched them slowly consume in the flame of the lamp.

"This is the last time any one shall compare Ward and me to my disadvantage," he thought. "I will begin preparations to leave to-morrow. And I won't go to Dakota, either. Dakota is too near. I shall go to Seattle, San Francisco, Alaska, or perhaps Hong Kong. I don't think I should be disturbed in Hong Kong by that laugh of his, confound him."

Glancing in the glass, he was fairly angered to observe how white and haggard he looked. He sat down on the foot of the bed, feeling faint and very miserable.

"I have no more nerve than a girl!" he thought, in a fury with himself. "Why do I care so to be loved? Why is it so like death to be torn from the old home, and from the only woman who could ever have made it home for me?"

He gazed long and wistfully at his mother's picture. Something in its sweet expression must have tranquillized him, for at last he fell into a sound sleep, with the lamp still burning. And the eyes of his sainted mother still seemed to watch him tenderly.

* * * * * *

Ed convalesced rapidly, and by the end of the week

was able to go about the house again, able to occupy his "den" once more, and leave his father — who secretly detested him more than ever — to himself. Ed found some changes up-stairs which would once have angered him, but really made him grateful now. The woodwork had been thoroughly scrubbed, and pretty rugs were on the floor, the walls whitewashed, neat paper blinds put up, and over them hung fresh muslin curtains. All the flashy pictures had disappeared, together with the sensational books and papers. Ed felt glad that the first temptation which he had expected to encounter had been removed — debasing literature and pictures. It was Syd who had made a bonfire of these, mentally registering a vow that no other rubbish of that kind should ever accumulate in a home of his. A search of Charlie's room had revealed some surprises in this line, too, and had materially increased the conflagration in the back yard.

"I'd thank you to leave my things alone," said Charlie, angrily. "You're nicer than you're wise, I think."

"I don't propose to have any more minds contaminated by bad literature and pictures," said Syd. "If I had done my duty by Ed, he might have grown up a much better boy. I call such books as these," he added, throwing another on the flames, "the Devil's Bible."

Charlie walked off sullenly, but he said no more, for he knew Syd was right.

Ed's hideous bed had been renovated, all the

"strings" removed, and now the covers were clean and whole, the pillows snowy.

Instead of the dingy, unwashed lantern in one corner, stood a stand supporting a lamp, a Bible, and some books by Pansy, Miss Alcott and Trowbridge. In a vase beside the Bible was a handful of great pansies, nodding like friendly faces. The rickety old stool, that used to serve as chief seat of honor, was gone, and in its place stood a comfortable rocker. The "wheels" had not been disturbed, but the shavings and *debris* had all been cleared away. Ed thought it was all Lele's doings, and was going down to thank her, when he saw a note pinned to one of the curtains addressed in Jean's unmistakable chirography. Opening it, he read:

"DEAR ED: — I have never in my life done much to make you happy or your home attractive. You know I feel differently now, and would give a great deal if I could have the past to live over again. But I know that can never be. The future will be my past some day, if I live, and I hope I may be able to look back over it without so much regret. When Lele wanted to fix up your room as it is now, I wouldn't let her, except to buy the rugs and curtains, because I felt that this ought to be part of my atonement. I fixed it up on uncertainties, not knowing how long we may be here; but while we *are* here, I want you to be comfortable. Lele can make you happier by being with you, but I'm such an irritating (a blot), contrary creature (another blot) that it is best for me to show my good will by working for you rather than talking to you, for you know I can't keep my temper two minutes, but *will* fly off the handle like a piece of ill regulated machinery. . . . I've tried to fix things up without destroying or putting out of sight anything you valued, but if you miss anything, just say so, and I'll make it right, if I possibly can.

"I know you like pansies, Ed, if you don't care much for other flowers, so I've picked all my choicest ones for you. The pansy means 'thought,' you know, and when you look at these, remember you have my best thoughts. And will you not give me yours in return? Life would be so much happier for me if I were not perpetually conscious of doing and saying things to make my brothers and sisters miserable. Oh, Ed! help me conquer my wretched temper, and to be a Christian.

"Your loving sister, JINSEY."

Ed was quite a different boy sitting in his easy chair perusing these lines, from the Ed Fairfax whom we remember as coming down from this room in a towering passion because some effort had been made to sweep and garnish it. Still the old nature was too strong to permit him to go to Jennie with words of gratitude and love. The interview would have been an awkward one for both. Writing was a hard task for Ed, but the next morning when Jennie went up to make his bed she found an answer to her note, pinned to the curtain, where hers had been. She unpinned it with trembling fingers. It was badly written, misspelled and unpunctuated; everything about it was faulty, except the sentiment, and *that* breathed of gratitude, hope and good-will, which fairly glorified the uncouth epistle in the eyes of his repentant sister. Poor Jen in her narrow life had received few enough notes to treasure, as girls do in their teens. But this one of Ed's she kept always with her most cherished possessions.

It seemed to mark the first mile-stone in the upward course of both. But there was a long and weary jour-

ney between them and the resting place at the top of the hill; many an hour of storm lay between these two souls and the peace they longed for.

Ed also kept Jennie's letter. Years afterward he showed it to her, when it was cut out in the creases, and told her how great its influence had been in many an hour of temptation. Through all her life she trembled to think how near he had come to destruction. Oh, sisters! do not shut your eyes to the opportunities around your fireside until it is too late. Regrets will be useless then.

The following Sunday afternoon Ed and Lele had a long talk over the past, present and future.

"I was sick — perfectly *sick* of life," he told her, "when I went away the day before thrashin'; I had had several quarrels with different members of the family, and was disgusted with myself and angry with every one. Worse than all, I was discouraged because I must stay here when I wanted so bad to learn a trade. I didn't think, as father said, that I could ever amount to anything, an' I meant to go off an' kill myself. But after the way you talked to me about bein' a Christian, I hadn't the courage to do it. I wandered around that night for hours, tryin' to get up grit enough to send a bullet through my skull; but everywhere your eyes were before me, your voice was soundin' in my ears. I couldn't do it, so I went away an' began to kill myself in a slower, disgracefuller way by dissipation."

He leaned forward, shadowing his downcast face with his hands.

"When I think," he went on, "of the vile company I got into, and my forgery and drunkenness — of gettin' arrested an' having *delirium tremens* — I know just how I look in the eyes of everybody that knows me, and I see how useless it is ever to try to be anything here. Nobody could ever forget my bein' a thief, and in jail, an' having the *tremens*. How they would sneer at the idea of my turning saint, especially the boys! I'm afraid, Lele, actually *afraid* to go outside the big gate, for fear I'll meet some of my old pals and be weak enough to let them drag me down again."

"Poor boy!" said Lele, tenderly.

"If I were among strangers, I would choose good associates or none; but here I can't *choose,* because people have lost all faith in me. If I were brilliant and jolly, with plenty of money, I don't suppose it would matter much what I did; people would still treat me well; but I never was anything in society but a cipher, and now I've degenerated into a blot. What's to become of me is more than I can see."

"Father will not hold you on the farm any longer against your wishes; he told me so. But he also told me that your 'spree' had cost him over two hundred dollars — money which might have been used in helping you learn a trade."

"Yes, I know I've brought it all on myself. I

deserve no pity," said Ed, crimson with shame. "Here I must stay, and God alone knows how it will all end. The stronger I get, the stronger grow the old feelings, hatred for all the old associations and longing for — liquor. I can't be anything but a reprobate, and what's the use to try?"

His eyes were downcast, but she saw that the lashes were wet. It was a strange sight indeed to see Ed Fairfax weep. He felt utterly hopeless.

But in Lele's heart hope was by no means dead. Her faith in the goodness and power of an ever-watchful Providence remained unbroken.

"Have faith in God, Ed," she said, earnestly. "Give Him your heart and leave everything to Him. Only He can help you."

"I feel you are right," said Ed, "but I'm as helpless as a baby, morally. I want to do right, but I can't stand a breath of temptation. I have no more moral force than a feather has weight."

A long, serious talk followed. In the midst of it, Tude appeared to say that Ward Collins had called. Lele declined to see him, but sent a little note instead.

"I am having a talk with Ed that may mark an era in his life," she wrote. "I am sure you will forgive me if I let him know that he is just now the most important man in the world to me. The poor boy is so weak and despondent that it would grieve you to see him. I will see you with pleasure at another time."

"If that isn't devotion!" thought Ward, as he pocketed the note. "Confound the luck! I never

knew a girl that had as much sympathy to waste on other people as Lele has."

He went off hurriedly, without asking Jennie to drive, in Lele's place, as the latter had hoped. At the red gate he met Hubbard.

"Not turned down!" exclaimed Keith.

"And for that precious run-away brother of hers, whose face would stop an eight-day clock! It seems she's preaching to him, and won't have her sermon interrupted. Isn't she queer?" grumbled Ward.

"Precious good, I call it, for a sister! What would Trix care where *you* went so she got her Sunday afternoon's drive?"

"What would she care, indeed? My spiritual welfare has been shamefully neglected. All the more reason why I've got to have a religious wife."

"But perhaps you've been too one-sided in your devotion. A girl sometimes needs to know that 'there are others.' What say to paying a call at St. John's? Maud's awfully pretty cousin from Pittsburg is there."

"I don't want Lele to think I'm gone off in a fit of pique to call on another girl, when she was so nice in explaining about Ed. It wouldn't help my cause any with her, Hubby."

"It wouldn't hurt it any, I guess."

"Miss Prescott isn't my style, and besides, I'd just as lief not see Maud this evening."

"I'd just as lief you wouldn't, myself," laughed Keith. "But I've promised to take Maud buggy-riding this afternoon, and *three's* a crowd, you know."

"Especially since kissing is a game that only two can play at!"

"Oh, the dickens! Say you'll go, Polly. That's a dear!"

"Miss Prescott is so — flip; and I never did fancy a regularly fast girl, as you know."

"But for once, Polly, you'll tolerate her — just to oblige me?"

"Y-e-s, if I must. But, confound you, Keith, I'll not do it again even to oblige *you*."

It was in this way that Ward met temptations from his too numerous friends. It was not possible for him long to resist, even when he would have preferred following a very different course. Any stronger mind could dominate him easily, either for good or evil.

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The days went by as though winged. Every one counted the time to the fifteenth of September with ever-increasing dread. The mortgage was due at that date; there was no money to pay withal, and Mr. Fairfax knew of no one to whom the mortgage could be transferred. The farm, if sold under the hammer, would just about satisfy the debt. No wonder Mr. Fairfax looked gloomy, and was heard to sigh and groan as he rummaged his desk in the vain hope of finding some paper that would help him in the present dilemma. Penury sat opposite and stared at him mockingly through the long summer afternoons.

Mr. Fairfax had all his life been too much wrapped up in outside affairs to pay much attention to the

family, and he now regretted most deeply that he had not done more to bind the hearts of his children to him. A feeling of resentment against him as the chief author of all their financial troubles rankled in their breasts. Even Lele felt a sort of contempt for him that kept her aloof for a time. But seeing how much his spirit was broken by his troubles, her tender heart melted. Going up to the despondent man, who sat at his desk with his head bowed upon his hands, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him tenderly. He was not a demonstrative or fond parent, but he was grateful for the sympathy which at another time he would have repelled.

"Things are in a bad shape, daughter," he said in a hollow voice.

"I feel so sorry for you, papa," was the tearful response. It grieved her unspeakably that she could suggest no positive cure for the ills that beset him. If only she could hear from Mr. Carpenter!

But while she could offer little substantial help, she would not leave him to face his troubles alone. And the others emulating her example, softened, too, toward the parent to whom they feared that they had been unjust.

Still the shadow deepened day by day, hour by hour. Syd grew more taciturn; Mr. Fairfax more silent and preoccupied; Jen less communicative. Lele was quieter, too, and not hopeful, for she had not heard one word from her guardian concerning a plan she had suggested to him, and if that failed, she could

think of no other. Besides, Syd's neglect crushed her spirits, and Ward's untiring devotion worried her. But through it all she was as serene in temper, as earnest in sympathy as ever, striving unobtrusively to scatter what little sunshine she could amid the general gloom. And now her sympathy was sorely needed, for the clouds thickened fast. Dock, the best work-horse, was driven off and sold to satisfy one of Mr. Fairfax's debts; Mr. Heldt sued for damages to his growing corn and truck-patch, and Jennie's whole flock of turkeys disappeared, never to return. Even Cora shared in the general accumulation of troubles, for the faithless Ol deserted her entirely for Sue Hubbard.

A huge maple-tree stood in a corner of the back-yard, from one of whose branches hung a long chain swing, where of evenings the young people, even including Lele, swung by turns, or dreamily sat "letting the old cat die."

One evening the younger members of the family were gathered here, as usual, Cora in the swing and Tude in her lap, Clem and Charlie lying on the grass near by. All were in a pensive mood, their minds busy with somber, unchildish thoughts — thoughts of being torn from their old home, of giving up their favorite haunts, and of going far away, they knew not whither. Cora's mind was haunted, too, by reflections on the fickleness of man. She regretted ever putting on long dresses, now she had no beau, and seriously meditated wearing her hair in braids again.

"Jen thinks we'll have to go," Cora said, breaking

an oppressive silence, when Tude slipped out of her arms to put her adored wax Lily into her cradle at the root of the tree.

"If Jenks would only *scold!*" said Clem, plaintively, "I'd not mind it half so much. I wouldn't object to *movin'*. But seems like there's somebody dead about the house when you can't provoke Jen anyway."

"I guess it's 'cause she feels in her bones that we're goin' to move," said Tude. "She's commencin' to pack. She says she won't be turned out in the big road with ever'thing topsy-turvy. I guess I'll be gettin' all my doll-rags together."

"You'd better bury Lily out in the garden," said Charlie, dolorously. "She's too fine to live in a dug-out."

"What's a dugout?" asked the child, her blue eyes full of wonder.

"Why, it's a place dug out o' the ground an' covered with sod, where people what's et up with mortgages have to congregate. They have a hole in the roof to let out the smoke, an' bunk around in a circle like Esquimaux. They live mostly on fat meat an' cornbread. They dig in tooth an' toenails, an' work mostly from twenty to twenty-five hours a day," said Charlie, as though conning a lesson. "Syd says we're to go to Dakota if we stay with him, an' I rather guess we will. I don't pin much faith to my revered dad when it comes to grub an' shelter."

"Won't we miss this swing of summer evenings,

and the veranda and honeysuckles," said Cora, with a repressed sob.

"And Ol," concluded Charlie.

"An' the blackbirds. I wonder who they'll be hollerin' at next summer, an' who'll be wearin' hisself out clappin' at 'em with clapboards," meditated Clem.

There was a pause, during which Ol Stuart's dog barked continuously. Cora sobbed outright.

"That's you, Code," said Charlie, impatiently; "bawl your eyes out for a fellow with a face like a pug dog."

"I'm not," retorted Cora, but she sobbed again. "I don't mind leaving Ol one bit," she added. "But think of leaving all the Prior red apples, an' the peaches, an' cherries, an', boo-hoo! all the currants, and rosebushes, an' our new white grapes, an' strawberries for them Collinses!"

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The few days preceding the sale were mainly devoted to rummaging the garrets and storerooms, and raking out chests and drawers and presses preparatory to what seemed the inevitable moving. How many pleasant memories, how many sad ones, each article awoke — too good, many of them, to burn; too cumbersome to think of moving. For instance, Charlie's old colt-skin-covered trunk was overhauled. This was filled with a collection of relics of which Charlie was very fond, though Jennie had long ago dubbed the box and all it contained "a mess of conserned trumpery — the plague of her life — and she would give the

world to know that it was at the bottom of the sea." In summer it reposed in the store-room up-stairs, where Charlie spent most of the rainy days, a fact attested by innumerable muddy tracks in the halls and on the stairs. As winter approached, he invariably lugged it down to the kitchen and stowed it securely under the table, there to remain until house-cleaning time, taking, as Jen declared, every afternoon, when she had exerted herself particularly hard to set the kitchen in perfect order, to spread his treasures all over the floor, luring in a horde of small, ragged, blear-eyed, catarrhy urchins, the children of the tenants, to trade pistols, arrow-heads, and other boyish trophies.

Charlie had in his trunk a collection of all the wrecked and broken firearms in the neighborhood, apparently, besides all sorts of odd toys and implements carved from wood and lead; and a store of musty farm journals, which he valued chiefly for the puzzles. By far the most valuable part of the collection, in his estimation, consisted of his Indian relics, several scrap-books full of bear stories, and a file of old newspapers, marked, "Not to be destroyed." These last, placed on top, filled the trunk to bursting, so that it would never quite close, but always had to be secured with a rope.

By this trunk Charlie "stood like a stone wall."

"When we move," he said, "that old colt-skin goes, too! No odds where we go, the place has got to be big enough for me an' that colt-skin."

Jennie had passed many wakeful nights planning the prospective moving, and arranging in her mind

what could, should and *must* be parted with. Many and many a bitter pang did thoughts of losing the dear household gods give her, until one night, in her mental survey of the establishment, she came to the "old colt-skin," and in a moment experienced a thrill of relief. A ray of comfort had at last penetrated the gloom. No matter what there might be in the new home to worry and vex her, the abominated "colt-skin" would be forever a thing of the past. It was worth many another sacrifice just to rid the house of that one supreme discomfort. A feeling of compensation for some of her lost treasures stole over her; she felt soothed, and almost immediately fell asleep. The next morning, happening to inquire for Charlie, she was electrified by the reply —

"Up-stairs packin' his ole colt-skin!"

The sleeping lion was roused in Jennie. Her eyes snapped with their old fire, and going up-stairs two steps at a time, she discovered Charlie in the center of the store-room, his face crimson with the exertion he was making to close the lid of the overflowing trunk.

Jennie paused a moment with her hand on the door-knob, feeling sorry for the disappointment in store for him, but resolved to be firm.

"Charlie, what are you doing?" she asked, as a prelude to attack. She knew well enough.

"Packin'!"

"But you know we can't move that rubbish. You mustn't think of it, Charlie."

All the boy's native combativeness awoke. His eyes blazed as he pushed back the curls of hair from his flushed brow and faced her:

"I just *will* think of it, so there!" he said, defiantly. "Where this colt-skin can't go, I *won't!*"

"We can't afford the expense of moving rubbish to Dakota."

"This ain't rubbish. It's valuable, every bit of it. I sorted it out and left everything out I could spare," and he pointed to a little pile of dust and mice-chewed paper. "I can't, just *can't* give up a single thing that's left." He spoke quite humbly for willful Charlie.

"I wouldn't make you leave it," said Jennie, beginning to relent, "but you must see how impossible in our new home it will be to find room for anything except really necessary things."

"*They are* necessary, Jinsey — just as necessary as bread and butter. Why, what would I do rainy days if I hadn't my relics an' bear stories?"

Jen said no more, but she felt more than ever depressed in spirit when she went down-stairs. Charlie and that colt-skin could never be peaceably divorced — that was certain. How she was to endure the pair of them in her new home was something that she had not grace sufficient to reflect upon.

No one now had any doubt that they were to be sold out. Syd and Lele each had a plan to save the farm, but, ignorant of each other's movements, they were working at cross purposes, and neither had any longer much hope of success.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Sale.

Mr. Collins came one day shortly before the interest was due and asked for a settlement — he needed the money. There was only one way to settle, and he knew it. Mr. Fairfax, driven to the wall, was forced to waive all rights and let the farm go to sale. In vain he pleaded for an extension of the note; equally useless was his appeal to have the sale deferred until later, in order to make the sale more generally known, and increase the chance of its selling to advantage.

"I don't do business that way," was the reply. "I've waited on you for several years, an' now I propose to settle up to *my* advantage, not yours."

"You're hardly human, Si Collins," said Syd, who was present.

"You skeercely expected me to *give* you the note, did you?" asked old Si, lighting his vile pipe and pushing his straw hat back with a grin. "I confess I never expected but what you an' Lele would arrange to keep the place — between you," he added, with a wink.

Syd stepped to the door and flung it open.

"We've had enough of you and your insults," he said, through his teeth. "Clear out!"

Si threw back his head with a laugh. But he watched Syd out of the corner of his eye as he passed out. When he was on his horse, cantering down the lane, he breathed more freely.

"Syd's an ugly customer to wake up!" he thought, with a shrug. "I'm glad *that* business is over."

It was thus borne in upon the unwilling minds of the Fairfax family that foreclosure must come. The farm was advertised at sheriff's sale, all legal preliminaries taken, and in what seemed a very short time the dreaded day of sale arrived.

Ward was not in attendance; he hated sales in which his father was interested, particularly of this character. Poor old Syd would probably be there, looking the picture of despair, and Ward shrank from seeing him. He felt truly sorry for him and for all the Fairfaxes, but what could he do? He couldn't lift the mortgage, and nothing else would help them.

He had tried to keep from urging his suit with Lele until this hateful sale was over, when the fact that *his* father instead of Lele's owned the Fairfax homestead might prove a factor in his favor. The family would so soon be homeless, as well as nearly destitute, that Lele would be driven by a sense of duty to make some arrangements by which they would be benefited. And since the family must begin immediately to plan for the future, he felt that his chance of winning Lele would be much greater than formerly, as she could not possibly do anything in the way of furnishing pecuniary aid until she got control of her property, which would

not, according to the provisions of her aunt's will, be until she married. The day of this sale might, therefore, be an opportune time to urge a final answer to his all-important question.

But would she marry him? He had the natural confidence of a buoyant, seldom-disappointed nature; still he could not but know that there were few grounds for hope. He fidgeted around the house all day, more restless and troublesome, Trix declared, than Roy at his very worst; and toward sunset (when he was sure Lele must have heard the result of the sale) completed a toilet twice as elaborate as usual. Still feeling dissatisfied with himself, he went into the parlor and critically viewed his figure in the full-length mirror, wondering if any improvement was possible from the crown of his curly head to the soles of his polished shoes.

Trix was at the piano practicing a dreamy German waltz, and looked curiously at him over her shoulder as she played.

"Are you worse stuck on yourself than usual?" she asked, with a little satirical half-laugh.

Ward blushed like a girl.

"Trix, be kind, that's a darling," he pleaded. "Do you think I look all right? I'm awfully, *desperately* anxious to look my best to-night."

"Going to propose?" asked Trix, still running her tapering fingers over the keys and regarding him with an odd, provoking callousness.

"N-o." ("Better not tell her I've done that, since

Maud wasn't the girl," he reflected, for Trix disapproved of all other girls.) "But I *do* want to make a stunning impression."

"You ought to — in that suit. The girl who would refuse such a handsome fellow wouldn't be worth crying over. But, Ward, I tell you candidly that there *are* girls in the world who would be quite capable of it; that Fairfax girl, for instance. I wouldn't give her a chance, if I were you."

"Don't take the wind all out of my sails," cried Ward, and hurried out of the room before she could quiz him further. He didn't want to give Trix *too* good a chance to say, "I told you so."

The distance across the fields was so short that Ward often walked to Fairfax's; and he did so this evening. The path led through the little burial-ground in the meadow, and here he paused for a time indecisively before taking the hillside path that would in three minutes' walk conduct him to *her,* and also to bliss or bitter disappointment.

He felt that he needed a little leisure to reflect and steady himself, for somehow he felt terribly shaken and nervous. If he should lose her after all! He had never met with any out-and-out disappointment of this kind in his life, but from his great lack of encouragement in that quarter, he thought such a contingency appallingly possible.

He sat down on an ancient slab near the gate, partly screened by some cedar bushes, and gazed at the old brick house, which would ere long, perhaps, be his.

He was too much his father's son to look upon the beautiful old farm-house without a feeling of exultation, now that it was coming into his possession.

Ward had not waited to hear the result of the sale before leaving home, but felt perfectly easy as to the result. Plans for improvement began to form in his mind. The Fairfax family would leave soon — Syd would see to that. They always had depended upon Syd ever since he was a child, and he was not likely now to throw them upon Lele's bounty. He devoutly wished that Syd would have pride enough to induce his stubborn old step-father to emigrate with his needy family to some distant corner of the Union. Ward had but a limited desire to have all his wife's relatives clinging like barnacles to his family ship throughout his life voyage.

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But while Ward is so happily miserable, how speeds the time in the old house under the elms?

Syd had let the dismal, disheartening morning slip by without speaking a word to Lele. He knew she had not yet given Ward his final answer, and not for worlds, just at this crisis, would he have influenced the result by an act, word or deed. Oh, the agony of this hopeless, this galling poverty.

Did she divine his reasons for keeping aloof, that she could remain tranquil through the long hours of that still, warm September day, each hour of which seemed to fill the space of two? Perhaps she did.

The afternoon hours were particularly harrowing,

Any moment of any hour, from 1 o'clock to 5, their home might be changing hands at the steps of the county court-house. This was what put Lele on the rack, and made the day one to be remembered for its painfulness through life. She had written to her guardian, Mr. Carpenter, urging him to come or send a man to bid it in *for her;* but his reply had not been encouraging, and she was still in total ignorance as to whether he would send a bidder to the sale. Consequently she dared not say a word of comfort, for fear of rousing groundless hopes, even to unhappy Jennie, or to her father, who was prostrated with nervous headache and not able to leave his room.

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The farm had been pretty extensively advertised at sheriff's sale, notwithstanding the short notice, and a large crowd assembled at the court-house door early in the afternoon. There was other business to transact, however, and it was past 4 o'clock when the sale began.

Syd, without having said a word on the subject at home, had completed every arrangement with the loan and real estate agent of the L—— Bank to bid it in for him, and he was prepared to bid pretty high rather than let Mr. Si Collins have it. True, it would burden him with another heavy mortgage, but it would give him for some years undisputed control of the farm. He could keep the family together until the boys were qualified, by what educational advantages and training he could give them, to do for themselves, and by adopting certain plans that he had long wished to try, he

believed that he might eventually pay off the mortgage. It was his best, almost his only chance to get on.

The sale began. Si Collins in his Sunday best, but with the inevitable pipe stuck in his mouth, was in high good humor, having actually committed the rare extravagance of a hotel dinner — a sure indication of good spirits, roused by the prospect of a profitable investment. Syd stood near him with an air of ill-assumed indifference. He felt that everything he had in the world was at stake, and had a sickening premonition that he would lose. The real-estate man had refused to bid beyond a certain figure. If it went higher, Syd must give it up. He had not been able to procure any other aid.

There were several bidders at first, Maud St. John's father among the rest, but soon the bidding was limited to Mr. Collins and the real-estate man. Old Si appeared to enjoy the sight of Syd's colorless face and hollow eyes. He made his bids deliberately, often purposely hesitating until the "hammer" was ready to fall before raising his opponent's bid.

"For the Lord's sake, don't tantalize him any more," whispered Ol Stuart, who had in his boyish heart a soft spot for Cora's brother. "Go through with a rush, can't you? This is a confounded shame."

"Hold your tongue, Ol; I'm doin' this," said old Si, and he made another deliberate bid. The real-estate man raised it ten dollars.

"Another bid — do I hear it?" yelled the auctioneer. "Going, going"—

"Fifty dollars more!" shouted old Si.

The real-estate man shook his head and turned away, while Collins's friends gave a feeble cheer, and those who favored Syd and had been watching him sympathetically, gave vent to suppressed sighs and murmurs of disappointment. Now that it was known that he had hoped to become a purchaser many of the crowd experienced a feeling of genuine pity for him, and expressed regret in no measured terms that he could not have been successful in buying it in. But Syd waited for none of their sympathy. Heart-sick to the verge of faintness with disappointment, he turned and hurried from the scene.

He went straight home, and seeing Lele's white-robed figure slowly climbing the path to the burial-ground, hurried after her in obedience to some instinct which made him wish to communicate the news first of all to *her*. Jennie, who was watching for him, knew by his face as he passed the house that his tidings must be evil. But ignorant of his plans — for he had not dared to raise false hopes by mentioning them — she had felt that there was little to be hoped for, and had spent the whole afternoon in tears.

Before Lele reached the gate, she looked back, and seeing Syd approaching, she paused till he came up. One glance told his tale of defeat. Not a word was said, but both walked on involuntarily until they reached the gate, when they stopped and looked once more into each other's pale faces, while Ward, unseen,

gazed at them from his position on the slab, as though fascinated.

"I saw you coming up here," Syd began, mechanically, to Lele, "and thought I had better follow you and tell you our bad news at once. Si Collins has bought the farm!"

Lele gave a little cry of despair. *Why* had not her guardian given her the help she so much needed? She had never realized until now how much she had depended upon that one hope

"I thought I could perhaps get it, myself," said Syd, huskily, and drew his cap down over his eyes. "I took your advice of weeks ago about getting help from the L—— Bank, you remember." He would not tell her that he had thought of it long before she mentioned it. "They were very kind, and if Mr. Collins had not bid so high, as if in spite, I should have secured it, and been able to pay for it in time."

He set his teeth hard to suppress a groan. It was the greatest disapoointment of his life, and until this moment he had never realized its magnitude. To see Lele, to love her, and to be driven from her by sheer force of circumstances, was worse than death.

"And you — must go away?" questioned Lele, as miserable at the thought as himself.

"Yes, very soon. None of us care to stay long under *his* roof."

"Oh, Syd, I can't realize it. To think you should come so near getting the farm and then to lose it!" cried the girl, hardly able to restrain her tears.

"It is true, though, and we *must* realize it. To-night I intend to complete all arrangements with my step-father for breaking up and leaving here, and to-morrow I shall leave for the West to look up a location. The others will join me as soon as possible. You and Ed"—

He was interrupted here.

Ward had roused himself from the stupor into which astonishment had thrown him, and had come forward, feeling like an intruder, but elated at the ease with which all obstacles to his future peace of mind had been removed. Since sitting on the slab he had been assailed by a few fears that some untoward event might arise which would serve as a barrier yet between him and Lele — such as the possibility of Syd's gaining control of the farm in some totally unexpected way. He thanked Fortune — his god — that no such contingency had arisen. It would be a clear "walk-over" with him the rest of the way!

His day dreams would be speedily, *fully* realized. In a few more weeks "old Ome" and his "kids" would be hundreds of miles away —cared for by loyal old Syd. Truly it was better to be born lucky than wise. Syd, with twice his brain and will-power, had never been lucky in anything, while everything all his life long had seemed to turn to Ward's advantage without an effort on his part. Even as he pitied poor old Syd, Ward thanked his deity, Fortune, that *his* lines had fallen in more pleasant places. Now that the farm

was his, he was sure of Lele. Luck was at high tide with him and sweeping all before it.

So, too, thought Syd when he saw Ward coming toward him, and his heart sank yet lower. The contrast just then between his forlorn friendlessness and Ward's exuberant hopefulness was as great as can be imagined. Syd, threadbare and shorn of every hope, felt himself a mere nonentity beside Ward, who seemed to abound in every grace that can make a man attractive in woman's eye. The very tone in which he spoke added another to the long list of his attractions.

"I couldn't help hearing what you were saying — about the sale, and all," he said, "and I'm awfully sorry things have happened so. Believe me, Syd," he almost felt at the moment that this was true, "I would induce my father to give up the farm yet to you if I could. But you know what he is — hard as flint! I can't do anything with him. Only what lies in my power I can do. And if Lele — Miss Fairfax — will give me the right"—

He stopped, confused, his ears tingling, his eyes fixed on Lele imploringly. She tried to speak, but could not, and Syd stood looking at him, uncomprehendingly.

"You both know, I guess, what brought me here this evening," he went on, looking appealingly at Lele again and taking her hand. "Lele — oh, *do* give me the right to speak, to tell Syd how truly I shall care for your happiness always."

"I can not," she gently said, withdrawing her hand.

"Ward, I like you very, very much, but I can not, *can* not love you. Your wife I can never be."

Did his ears deceive him? Her words had no meaning to him, for he was like one stunned. He was, however, silent for a moment only. Like one in a dream, Syd heard him go on, pleadingly:

"Only think what I have to offer you. If you marry me, I'll give you a deed for this farm as a wedding gift! You needn't see your father's family scattered. I'll help Syd and all of them. They shan't have to leave Pennsylvania, or even the old farm, for that matter. Oh, Lele, how *can* you refuse all this when they need your help so?"

Ward was in a mood just then to promise her the Persian Empire, if she had wanted it. All his life he had promised and failed to pay his vows, but how could she know that? It raised his hopes to see that his last proposition had a certain weight with Lele. For the first time he saw her hesitate, and the color come and go uncertainly in her cheeks, and in the lips which she vainly tried to keep from quivering. And now when he took her hand she did not repulse him. At this Syd nearly fainted. He felt that the scene could end in but one way, with Ward's face, voice and worldly prospects all to plead for him.

"I think you can decide this better without me," he said, turning away.

A small, white hand that trembled like a rose-leaf in the wind rested detainingly on his arm, and a pair of appealing sweet brown eyes looked into his.

"You want me to marry him?" she breathed, rather than spoke.

"I want you to be happy," said Syd, faintly. He felt that he could not endure another minute of this.

Lele turned to Ward again.

"Ward, I have already answered you," she said, gently. "You must not speak to me of this again. I can not be tempted by any prospect of worldly gain, for, as you know, I do not love you, and I will not pretend what I do not feel. We have lost all now and can afford to be brave."

"And you will never marry me." Ward had lost, after all!

"I will never marry without love, not even in order to be able to help those dearer than life itself. A moment ago I thought I could. But that is past. Some better way will be found to help them."

Ward turned away without a word and hurried homeward in a maze of wonder and defeat.

After he was gone Lele stood irresolute a moment, looking down. Why did Syd stand so like a marble statue oblivious to her presence? Was it for Maud that he had been so anxious to win the old home? And was the agitation she had witnessed but the effect of despair at losing what Miss St. John would have considered necessary to her happiness?

Lele had refused Ward, first because she did not and could not love him; but also because, as she deeply felt, she did and could love Syd. And he cared nothing for her after all! There rushed through her mind all

his coldness, his avoidance of her during days and weeks, and especially that never-to-be-forgotten scene in the orchard. As she thought of this she turned away.

It was only when he found that she was going that he roused himself to speak.

"Oh, Lele! Don't leave me. I — must tell you — something."

He spoke hurriedly, and yet with pauses between the words, for though he seemed calm, he spoke with desperate effort.

"You did right," he went on, "to refuse Ward if you really did not care for him. Love is truly 'the greatest thing in the world,' the only thing worth living and dying for, as I now know. And I see at last that no man, however poor, has a right to love a girl as I love you, and not — tell her of it; Oh, Lele!"

He held out his arms pleadingly, but she stepped back.

"You did not love me, Syd, when — when you spoke of me to papa in the orchard," she protested.

"I loved you then as much as I do now," he passionately declared. "That is to say, as much as I love my own soul. But I could not — oh, Lele, darling, don't you see? I feared to have you sacrifice yourself through pity for me or loyalty to duty."

"I don't think I am quite that sort of person," she said, demurely.

"It seems to me you are." His tone suddenly changed, and, stepping back, he folded his arms.

"Miss Fairfax, I had forgotten. I have a confession to make."

"Previous love affairs?" questioned Lele, in evident alarm.

"I have already told you of my foolish fancy for Maud. That didn't last long after it was put to a fair test. Something far worse."

He stood for a long minute looking at her with a deprecating expression in his dark eyes. Finally he said, very low:

"Lele, I twice decided to marry you for your money."

"I suspected it," said Lele, in the same tone.

"You had not been in the house three hours before I began to form a plan for robbing you of your aunt's money. It was almost as though you had fallen in with Italian bandits, Lele."

"I was secretly warned."

"What did you think of me?"

"I regarded you with contempt."

"You did right. But I repented, and I think you forgave me. In this place, on the first Sunday of your visit, I think it was."

"And the second time?"

"On the night of the party at St. John's — just before you saw the gorilla at your window. Do you remember our encounter in the hall?"

"I remember it." Lele's cheeks glowed with a deeper crimson. Was she ever likely to forget an evening fraught with blissful, if groundless, hopes?

"The shock I experienced when I learned what peril you had escaped, completely transformed my sentiments toward you. In short, I fell instantly dead in love with you, Lele. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"I think I have known—something like it." Lele's confusion was so delicious that no mortal man in Syd's position could have held firmly to his resolution of keeping at arm's length until he had done suitable penance by confessing all his shortcomings. Syd did not. When the confessions were resumed they were seated side by side on the slab Ward had so lately quitted, and not at arm's length, either!

"I fell desperately in love with you," he presently resumed, "and from that hour the sense of my contemptible meanness in wishing to rob you of your poor little fortune never gave me a moment's peace. It was not until I began to love you for your own sweet sake" (here occurred a digression) "that I saw my conduct as it would appear to you, and, in fact, to every one. After that I would not, I could not, *bear* to have it said that it was for your money I married you."

"If the money is a real obstacle," said Lele, saucily, "I might remove it by means of a charitable donation or something."

"Don't laugh at me, dear. If I had anything to offer you"— He stopped short and sighed. The shadow that had momentarily lifted settled on his face again.

"If you had bank stock and land," said Lele,

straightening his necktie, which was fearfully awry, "instead of the finest character in the world and the best heart, how much better it would be!"

"Bank stock and land have a value which you are too unworldly and inexperienced to recognize. But, my dear girl, they are things which a man must have before he has any right to think of marriage, or to ask a woman to wait long years for a union which may never be."

"That means," thought Lele, with a sinking heart, "that rather than compromise his foolish pride we are to spend our whole lives apart."

"No, sweetheart," Syd replied, exactly as though she had spoken. "I can not believe yet that independence is for me a thing unattainable. I mean to do my utmost to earn a home of my own somewhere in the west, and then perhaps it might not seem presumptuous to ask *you* to share it. Till then, may I keep this little talisman," taking from her hand a crumpled four-leaved clover which she had just plucked, "to remind me that I do not hope in vain?"

They looked into each other's eyes, and in that moment all doubts of each other were swept from their hearts forever.

CHAPTER XXX.

How the Day Ended for Ward and Syd.

And Ward?

His disappointment was indescribable, and I grieve to say reached a yet more melancholy climax than I have related.

As he reached the gate at home he almost ran over his evil genius, Morris St. John.

Morris was not the best friend Ward had ever had, or indeed the best a young man of principle could wish to have. But as Maud's elder brother, and Trix's "regular company," he had been with Ward quite a good deal, and his influence upon the irresponsible youth was beginning to tell.

"In heaven's name, what ails you, boy?" he asked.

"I don't know. I feel as though I'd been ground up," said Ward, hardly able to articulate. "Oh, Morris! is this your buggy? Take me away somewhere till I get my senses together. I don't want Trix to see me just now, for I can't bear her quizzing."

"You've been jilted by that brown-eyed Fairfax girl," said Morris, contemptuously.

Ward tried feebly to deny it, but the adroit Morris soon had the whole story.

"No harm done, I guess," he said, lightly. "We'll

stop at Heider's saloon and have a brandy and soda. I guess that will steady your nerves a little."

"But, Morris, I don't drink," protested Ward, feebly, as Morris hitched the horse in front of a saloon in the nearest town.

"Oh, that's all right," said Morris, "we'll get in at the back door, if you're too moral to enter from the street."

Ward kept protesting, but Morris soon had him in the saloon parlor, with several bottles on the table.

"Morris, I call this dog-mean," said Ward, peevishly. "You know I despise this sort of thing."

"Only thing you can do," declared Morris. "Three or four glasses of tiptop liquor will make a fellow forget a head-full of love troubles. I've tried it."

Ward took a few sips, and feeling somewhat revived, consented to swallow a few more. After that he regained his spirits, and — the next day had a genuine excuse for not facing the quizzing eyes of the family. Morris took care of him.

"You'll get over this attack," he said.

"But I'll not get over your cure, confound you," sighed Ward.

"You don't always propose to be a girl-boy with curls and rosy cheeks, do you, Polly? I should think you were old enough to begin to assert your manhood a little, and not mope and write poetry and lose your spirits over a deuced girl."

"The love I had for Lele Fairfax was too pure and holy to be drowned in this way, Morris," said Ward.

"Pure and holy fiddlesticks!" said Morris. "There are others — lots of them. And, Polly, it would have spoiled your whole life to have tied yourself to that little goody-goody nun. You've got to see life a little before you make your final choice."

"I'd rather not see life with you, Morris. I wish I had old Syd for mentor again. He always kept me straight."

"I'd hoe my own row, then, if I was so particular."

"I — can't!" sighed Ward.

I am sorry to leave my blue-eyed hero in company so little calculated to improve him. But even on the farm a young man without fixed principles is in sad danger, be he as popular as Ward Collins, or friendless as poor Ed Fairfax. And the time is coming when Ward and Ed, and even Syd, must vanish into the myth-land that lies beyond the closing chapter of a novel. We have time for but few more glimpses of their familiar faces before we leave them to make their way in the world unseen by us, but not therefore idle or inactive.

Let us wish them success.

* * * * * * *

When Syd and Lele returned to the house, on that memorable evening, the first person that they saw was Lele's guardian, Mr. Carpenter, calmly taking snuff on the veranda.

"Oh, guardy!" exclaimed Lele.

Mr. Carpenter placidly replaced his snuff-box in his vest-pocket.

"I hope, my dear child, that you are not sorry to see me," he said, shaking hands with his ward. "I confess I thought you would be rather glad," looking kindly at Lele, whose eyes filled with tears as she lifted them to his face.

"Indeed, Mr. Carpenter, I *am* glad," she cried, making a supreme effort to greet him cheerfully; "but if you only *could* have come in time to save our home from Mr. Si Collins, as I"— and the sentence ended in an irrepressible sob. The future began once more to show appalling possibilities.

"My child, that is exactly what I did. Don't cry and I'll explain," said the old lawyer, deliberately. "I, of course, took particular pains to investigate matters before venturing to invest your small fortune in land, as I had it safe for you where it was"—

"But you *did* invest it for me, as I suggested!" cried Lele, half-delirious with joy.

"I did; but be patient, for I have to state the facts in my own way. I sent a reliable man to examine the farm quietly, but with care, and at the last moment, in response to your frantic appeals for aid, (I think there were a dozen tear-blots on your letter), concluded to come myself and buy it in for you at any price, though I thought best to keep strictly *incognito* until the sale was over, and for that reason would not allow even *you* to know I was to be present, lest you should divulge the secret." (Mr. Carpenter had imbibed secret fears

of Lele's father, from her uncle probably.) "Learning in a round-about way that this young gentleman," laying his hand on Syd's shoulder, "also had his eye on the farm, I thought it only right to give him a fair show, and did not bid against him. When he retired so discomfited (to the regret, I believe, of most of the bystanders) I could see that Mr. Collins thought the farm was his. Then the fun began! For I was determined that if your worthy friend, Mr. Collins, got the farm, he should pay every penny it was worth. He saw this at last, and retired in disgust, leaving me master of the field, and you — *mistress of the farm!*"

"Mr. Carpenter! how can I ever thank you enough?" cried the delighted girl, hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry in the intensity of her joy.

"Your best thanks will be shown by finding me a good tenant," replied Mr. Carpenter, glancing at Syd. "From what I hear, I fancy Mr. McKnight will exactly suit."

"Thank you," replied Syd, rapidly changing color, as an appealing glance from Lele reached him. "I have already formed my plans for the future, and they include a settlement in the West, where I hope to do better for myself than I can here. But I shall see that you secure a first-class tenant, sir."

"Oh, Syd!" whispered Lele, reproachfully. "Will you refuse to be my tenant?"

"I'll consider the — position," Syd responded, with a half smile. Proud as he was, it was out of his

power to refuse any request Lele was likely to make.

"And, Lelia, I must not forget to tell you, as your decision is needed at once, that there is a vacancy in one of our schools which must be filled soon, and you are requested to fill the same, if you can, at a week's notice. The salary is $600 a year, with a chance of increase with success."

"And I shall not see you till next summer!" said Syd aside to Lele, when she had gleefully accepted and sent off a dispatch to that effect.

"No. I'd rather stay here," said Lele, involuntarily. Then her cheeks flamed.

"If I had bought the farm, you should not have gone to St. Louis to teach school — and left me," he replied; "but there isn't anything else to be done, I guess," he added, regretfully.

"I don't see," said Lele, with drooping lashes, "that it matters *which* of us has the farm."

"Don't you? It matters a great deal to me. We can't be married, Lele Fairfax, until I own this farm."

"Oh! If you are determined to purchase, I'll sell it for a mere song, Syd — one dollar and love and affection," she added, saucily.

"I don't buy on those terms," said Syd. Then, as they happened to be alone together for a minute or two, he kissed her and told her, with a sigh, that she was a thousand times too good to engage herself to a beggar like him.

"Yes; I'm too good, I know," retorted Lele, in her sweetest tones, "especially as you are the only man

I ever saw that I couldn't keep from falling in love with to save my life. And, Syd, I tried *so* hard." She slipped out of his arms and flew up-stairs to impart the good news to Jennie, who had been trying for the last half-hour to calm herself sufficiently to descend and learn the result of the sale before beginning to prepare supper.

Excited as she was, it was some time before Lele could make her realize that it was *she* who had bought the farm, and that Syd (despite his *penchant* for the "great and glorious West") was to be coaxed into accepting the care of it for three-fifths of all it could be made to produce.

"And now, Jinsey, darling, don't sit there pinching your arm to convince yourself that you are not dreaming," added Lele. "You *must* believe what I've said, and make up your mind to go to Oxford this winter to school; for since I'm to teach this winter, I can afford to send you and Cora, too. Tude and Ed shall spend the winter with me. Syd and the boys will have rather a lonely winter here, but I guess they will survive, with Sally Cahill's good cooking to sustain them. Father will be in Harrisburg, you know."

"All this for us!" exclaimed Jennie, with pathetic incredulity. "Oh, Lele, you *are* an angel," and she burst into tears. When she was calmer they discussed Lele's plans, which Jennie declared were far too generous.

"It will take nearly all you make to keep you and Ed," she said. "The rest of us will do very well here,

with the mortgage off our hearts. Why, I feel ten years younger already!"

"I want you to feel young, Jinsey. I'm thinking what good times you'll have with Nell Malcolm, Minnie Howard, and all the girls I know at Oxford, this winter."

"I might begin studying music while completing my education," mused Jennie.

"You certainly could."

"Oh, Lele, darling, don't tempt me to think of it. I know you can't afford it."

"Yes, I can. I shall have twelve hundred dollars to spend this year, and Oxford only costs a hundred and seventy, you know."

"But you couldn't take Ed and Tude to Mr. Carpenter's"—

"No; they'll be in California. We'll board at Mrs. Raymond's, or I'll rent a small flat and have my old nurse keep house for us. I still have my aunt's furniture, and it costs so little to furnish a flat. Our living will be very inexpensive. I know I can save enough to send you and Cora both to school. I want you to be as happy as I am this minute."

"I wish I could be," said Jennie, wistfully. "I never saw any one as happy as you are this minute, Lele. You look as though you hadn't a wish ungratified."

"I haven't, really," said Lele, sitting down on a footstool and laying her beautiful head in Jennie's lap.

"I am going to tell you a great secret, and I think I can trust you to keep it."

"You are going to marry Ward," said Jennie, as calmly as she could.

"Far from it, my dear. I leave him to you. It is Syd that I am to marry, some day, after he has made his fortune. He is too proud to share mine."

And Jennie experienced, perhaps for the first time, an unqualified joy in contemplating another's happiness.

The engagement, however, was not generally announced. Jean was the only one entrusted with the secret. Mr. Carpenter, even, was not consulted, still less Mr. Fairfax, who would have had small patience with Syd's (to him) incomprehensible scruples. The young couple both thought an engagement, which must of necessity cover several years, should be kept secret from all save the one whose happiness was most intimately connected with Syd's.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Conclusion.

Syd's plans for the future were again upset when he found that Lele, and *not* Si Collins, had bought the farm. But, since he had spent much of his life in forming plans which were afterward overthrown by circumstances over which he had no control, he very soon gave up all thoughts of going West and consented to become Lele's tenant.

Mr. Carpenter at once gave him the contract for rebuilding all the fences and putting the buildings in repair. Never in his life had Syd enjoyed any work more than he did the clearing away of those cobbled-up rail fences, and the construction of long lines of new picket-fence, to the intense disgust of Si Collins, who had been splitting rails for years to use on the Fairfax farm. But when Collins saw that all the fence next his line was being built "three feet in," and nothing said about "his half," he was ready to burst with rage.

"See here," he said to Syd one day, "I ain't goin' to have no 'devils' lane' next my farm. I'll keep up my half and no more."

"I don't care what you keep up," Syd retorted. "I've joined fences with you for the last time, and now, mind, if any of your stock get on my side of the

fence, they will be taken up and you can pay the costs. I've served my time driving stock out of the crops for nothing."

"You talk very large for a hireling," blustered old Si, contemptuously.

"I have leased this place at so much for five years," replied Syd, "with the privilege of buying, if I choose. You may call me a hireling if you care to, but don't come on this side of the line to insult me."

Si Collins went off muttering. But he built his line-fence and said no more about it.

"There's no use tryin' to put that fellow down," he confided to his wife; "he's got a start up-hill at last, an' blamed if I don't b'lieve he'll get to the top after all. I pulled through myself after a hard tussle, an' he's got the right sort of grit, too. Wish't Ward had more of it."

* * * * * * *

Lele persisted in her determination to send Jennie and Cora to Oxford a year, and having completed all arrangements for them, and securing an excellent housekeeper for Syd and the boys in the person of Sally Cahill — a former domestic of the family — whose husband was to work for Syd by the month, she, accompanied by little Tude, Ed and her guardian, set off for St. Louis. By the time they were comfortably settled in a flat, with Lele's old nurse for cook and housekeeper, it was time to begin her duties in the school-room.

The winter, though not devoid of trials and perplex-

ities, was by no means barren of joy, for no day failed to bring a letter from Syd, nor did a week ever pass without a budget of news from Jennie and Cora and the boys. Mr. Fairfax wrote occasionally, and seemed to be enjoying himself very well in Harrisburg, where he spent most of the winter, in a style not exactly becoming in a gentleman who was well-nigh penniless and whose children were depending upon either themselves or others for support.

All the family were back home again before June except Lele and Ed, who were to come for a two weeks' vacation, in August.

The year was propitious; crops were never better. When Mr. Carpenter came late in August to pass judgment on Lele's tenant, and make arrangements for the coming year, he was both surprised and gratified to find the appearance of the farm so much improved. The fences, which had given so much trouble, had been superseded by new ones; the buildings were in good repair; crops carefully tended; implements under shelter; stock well fed.

"McKnight, you are a capital fellow," he said, as he and Syd strolled over the fields on the day previous to that fixed for his return. "I never saw a more careful tenant, and you farm intelligently, too — seem to know what you're about. I declare, you couldn't do better if you owned the land."

"I take pride in my work,' Syd replied. "I used to think farming a soul-dwarfing, mind-shrivelling process, and almost despised myself for submitting to its

pettifogging details. I feel different now. I agree heartily with the man who wrote—

> "Who puts back into place a fallen bar,
> Or flings a rock out of a traveled road,
> His feet are moving toward the central star,"

Mr. Carpenter, I am proud to be called a farmer."

"And a book farmer at that," said Mr. Carpenter, with a smile.

"A genuine book farmer gets more out of life than can be obtained in any other walk of life. All honor to the noble army of men who are trying with tongue and pen to show the discouraged tiller of the soil what real book farming is."

"Yet you still belong to the tenant class of book farmers."

"My landlord never interferes with any of my plans," said Syd, with a smile; "there is a great deal in that."

"Your land*lady*, you had better say," retorted Mr. Carpenter. "Lele virtually controls the farm, and I think best not to interfere, as she is a clever young woman, and has a tenant who can be trusted. You two appear to have congenial tastes," he added, significantly. "I've noticed that you never disagree on any subject."

"No, we never disagree."

"My ward would be quite a belle if she cared for society at all, but she goes out very little, and I've been told that she declines all attentions from young men.

She is an odd girl — painfully odd. And she could marry so well, too, if she chose!"

He saw Syd's cheek flush darkly and a pained look dawn in his eyes.

"She ought to marry instead of drudging her life out in that school-room," Mr. Carpenter went on. "I don't know what the girl means."

"Then she has never told you that I — that we"—

"She has told me nothing, but I suspect — a good deal."

"I ought to have told you before that she has resolved to wait until I have a home to offer her."

"That might keep her from sharing a much better home than you can ever hope to offer her."

"I know it. I feel — in every way unworthy of her. I have always refused to bind her by any positive engagement until I could see my way to independence."

"And yet she owns this farm and lacks only my consent to her marriage to place it at your disposal!"

"I will never be dependent upon my wife, Mr. Carpenter."

"Well, you match Lele for oddity. It would not be a bad idea if you and she were to marry."

"Would you advise your ward to marry me?"

Mr. Carpenter reflected a while.

"Why not?" he finally said. "You are more equal now in reality than any mere financial equality can ever make you. Fact is, Mr. McKnight, you are the right sort of fellow to make any girl a good husband, and

I'm glad she has the sense to appreciate you," he added, with great heartiness.

"Thank you." Syd blushed like a girl at the compliment. "But there it is, you see," he sighed. "I'm not going to have people suspect that I married Lele for her money."

"Oh, she hasn't a great deal. Most of it is invested in this land. You might buy it in yourself if you choose to let your wife burden you with a mortgage!"

"I have thought of that and spoken of it to her. Of course, I won't have it for a cent less than it is worth, and it is worth more now than when she bought it."

"But land is actually selling for less than last year. I think six thousand dollars would be considered a fair price."

"I had some money in the estate," said Syd, thoughtfully, as they walked on. "My step-father allowed me five hundred dollars, which was less than I put in; but I thought I ought to be satisfied with that, as he hadn't much left after his debts were paid. That, with what I shall make this year, would enable me to make a payment of about a thousand dollars down. If I could be allowed time on the rest, I think I could pay out in five or six years."

It was so agreed. Syd bought the farm; Lele returned to her school. Jennie, having successfully passed the county examination for a teacher's certificate, began teaching in order to secure funds to defray the musical education which she had craved so long;

and Cora went back to Oxford, accompanied, to her great delight, by Sue Hubbard. Their joint admirer Ol, thus left to his own devices, spent, as he declared, "a perfectly awful winter."

"With you two girls out of it," he confided, "Bethany Ridge isn't worth the powder to blow it up."

This winter Lele had both Ed and Charlie under her care, the latter being a pupil in one of the public schools. He was compelled to study very hard to keep up with his class, which was fortunate for Ed, who was still rather shy of Charlie's "chaff," though he had himself improved in many ways.

Lele virtually devoted her life to her brothers, outside of school hours, and as she had some congenial friends who lent their aid, there was not much that could tempt the boys to spend even an occasional evening away from her presence. Ed will feel as long as he lives that he owes all the success in life that he will ever have to that loving sister's influence, "just at a time when so many boys miss their way, never to find it again." He abandoned all his bad habits, devoted himself to his trade, and became at last a brother that even Lele could be proud of. "But that is another story."

And Jennie, too, had profited by that sweet influence, for she conquered her temper at last, and in time became a very noble woman.

June came around again, and Syd found time to pay a visit to St. Louis. There was a very quiet wedding in Mr. Carpenter's elegant parlor — for that gen-

tleman insisted that the ceremony should be performed at his home — and his wife gave the wedding breakfast, which was spoken of in the morning papers as a "superb collation." Syd's heart failed him when he contrasted the old Pennsylvania farm-house with Mr. Carpenter's city residence, where, had she chosen, Lele's whole life might have been spent in ease and luxury.

"You've utterly thrown yourself away on me, Lele," he said later.

They were at Niagara, walking leisurely through Prospect Park.

"Why, Syd?"

"Your life at Mr. Carpenter's would have been so — different," he sighed.

"Yes; I should have had almost everything I wanted but — you," she said, softly. "I consider I've made a fair exchange, and if I'm satisfied, you surely ought to be."

"'Nother bridal couple, bless my soul!" thought a gouty bachelor, who happened to be passing. "This corner of the world is too full of them for me. What's the use to come here to flout their confounded happiness in the eyes of other people?"

Syd had glanced pityingly at the forlorn, crabbed old fellow, and wondered what *he* had ever done to be worthy of rescue from a similar fate.

"And to think that she loves me, after all!" he reflected.

* * * * * * *

They left for home a day or two later, and at the little station a genuine surprise awaited them. The station agent handed them a sealed letter, which they lost no time in reading:

"My Dear Old Syd and Lele:

"Just 'round the corner you will find Venus hitched to your buggy. I lost Di last week and it seemed a judgment on me for the mean tricks I had served you in getting Venus away from your stepfather. So I give her back to you, for I know, Syd, that you never regretted anything more than the loss of her. I know now how to sympathize with you as I never did before, for one may become attached even to a horse.

"Lele, my dear friend, it took me two years to get over the little scene in the graveyard. I felt heartbroken, then, but after all you never led me on, as some girls would have done, never gave me any real encouragement. I am glad now that it was Syd rather than any other fellow who won your heart, for I know how good and true he is, far nobler than I can ever be.

"Ever your friend,

"Ward."

"Syd," said Lele, with misty eyes, "if Ward had been half the man then that he is now, I don't know but that he might have won my love while you were concealing yours in horror of my little fortune."

"I'm glad his best traits developed late in life, then," Syd replied, laughingly. "But I like to believe that you were foreordained to be my wife, and couldn't have been anybody's else. Besides, as to Ward, there's room for improvement in the old fellow yet, if all reports are to be believed."

"Jennie can see no room for improvement, I imagine," said Lele.

"No; since she is home from school this spring, Ward is all devotion. I'm sorry to see it, for while I've always liked Ward (except as a rival!), I must say it would be a pity to see a talented girl like Jen marry a son of Si Collins."

"You and Jennie together could keep him straight."

"Did you ever see a barn stand a gale that had to be propped on both sides? Well, I never did. There are breakers ahead for Ward, and more trouble for a wife of Jen's temperament than you would imagine, judging him by what he was when you knew him. Morris St. John has had him in hand for two years."

"It hasn't helped him any, I am sure."

"I should think not. I hate to criticise the dear old fellow when I'm driving Venus as his gift. God knows I wish him well, and if there's anything under the sun that I can do to help him, I'll go out of my way to do it. The worst of it is, he's about as little to be depended on as a live wire, or a balance-wheel out of balance, or an automobile in the hands of a millionaire. And now," he added in a happier tone, "let's talk of something better worth while than finding fault with neighbors who send us such lovely *bridle* presents. Lele, how does Ed's religion hold out?"

"All right. It was the only thing that could ever have made a man of him. You used to be skeptical yourself, Syd, I remember."

"Yes, in the dark days of hopeless drudgery. It

was enough to try any man's faith. Thank Heaven, that's all past now. I expect to live and die a Christian."

Arrived at home in the soft summer twilight, Lele seemed the very embodiment of happiness as she stood on the veranda under the fragrant honeysuckles and received the congratulations of the friends who were assembled to greet her, among them Ward, looking as gay and handsome as ever; and Maud, still the belle of the Ridge, though Rumor said that Jennie McKnight might successfully have contested with her for supremacy had the latter cared to try, for Jennie had wonderfully improved during these two years, and Maud's blonde beauty was beginning to fade. That young lady had captivated a new beau at this time — a young lawyer from Harrisburg — and seemed totally indifferent to her former admirers, Ward and Keith, who were respectively attentive to Jennie and Alice Stuart.

The faithless Ol was scattering smiles and witticisms on all sides, but his choicest were still impartially divided between Cora and Sue Hubbard, who were inseparable chums, as of old.

The old farm-house, if not much changed externally, was greatly improved within, for snowy curtains had replaced the old faded hangings; new paper brightened the walls, and new carpets added to the comfort and elegance of the rooms.

Ward greeted the bridal party very cordially, though with no allusion to Venus, whom the whole

family welcomed home almost as gladly as they did Lele herself.

"You're a brick, you are, to give Venus back to Syd," Charlie exclaimed. "I hope every timber I've got will be shivered to splinters if I ever call you stingy again."

Ward laughed, and then sighed as Syd added his thanks to Charlie's.

"Don't mention it again, old man," he said. "You make me feel like the dickens. I declare you do!" flourishing his handkerchief with a tearful laugh.

"I'm glad the old friendly feeling is restored," said Syd, heartily.

"And restored for good this time, I hope," Ward replied, leaning on his friend's arm in the old dependent way. "You're going to have me on your hands yet as a relative, perhaps, though you objected to me once."

"No. I always recommended you."

"I want you to recommend me to — somebody else — to more purpose."

"I will with all my heart, Ward; but — somebody else has her head so full of music and a 'career' at present that I fear it will be useless."

"Her ambition now is to go to New York to have her voice cultivated, I hear," said Ward.

"Yes."

"I think I can settle that," Ward remarked, confidently.

Syd was silent.

"I think Jean will give up her career when she

finds that I am determined to become a relative of yours," Ward added.

Again Syd was silent. When he looked at Jean, who had developed into noble and self-reliant womanhood, he doubted much if Ward would ever become a relative of his.

Yet Mr. Markley was married again, and Jennie seemed perfectly indifferent to all admirers save one!

THE END.

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